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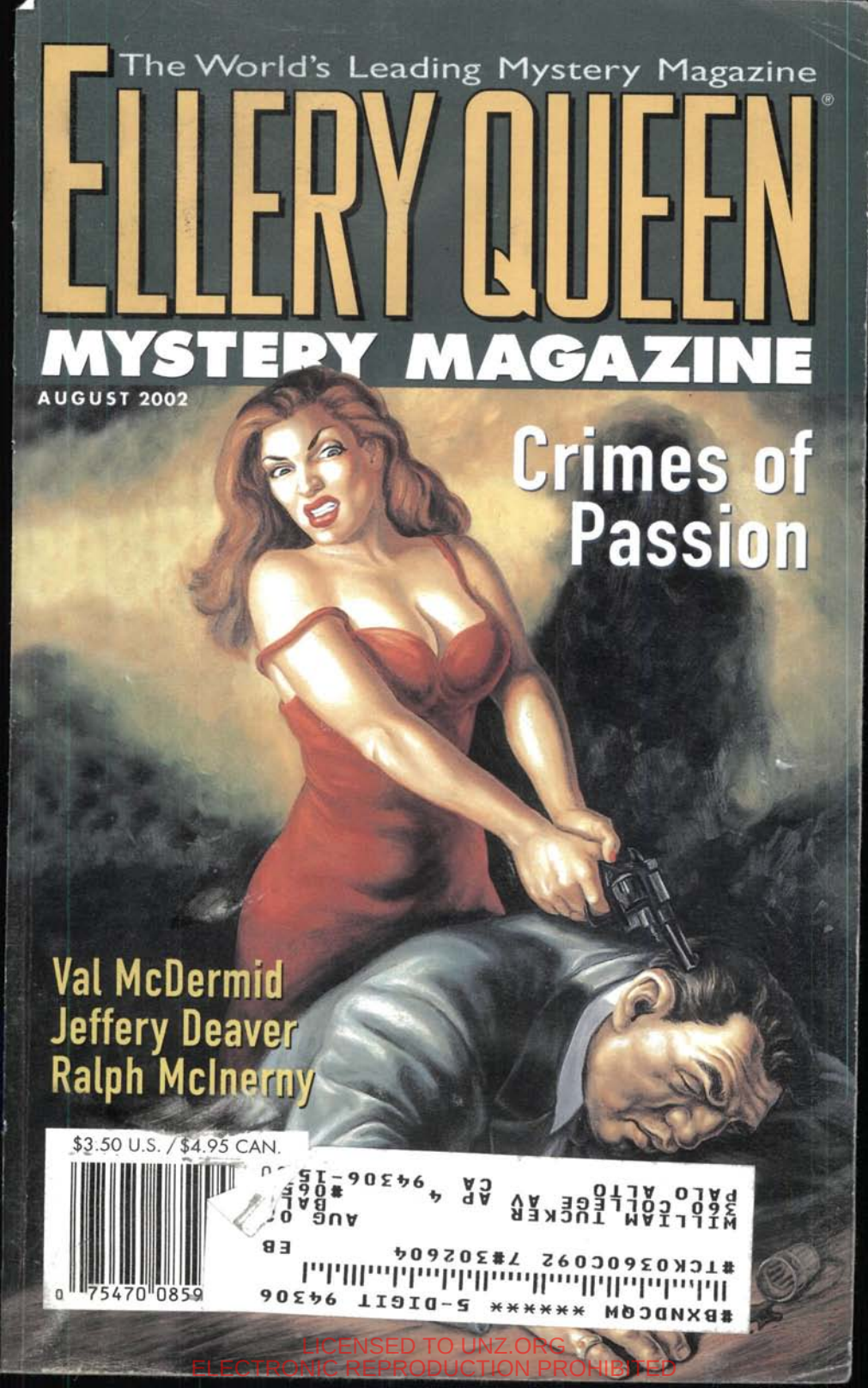

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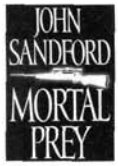

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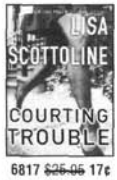

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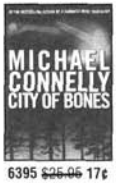

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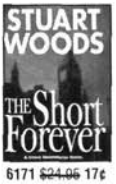

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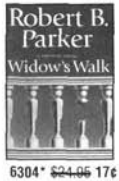

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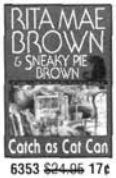

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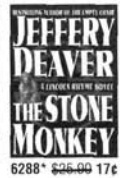

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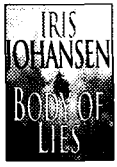

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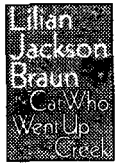

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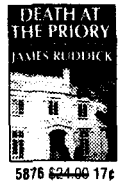

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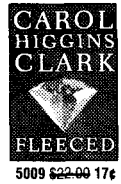

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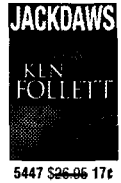

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CONTENTS

Blind justice?
Page 52

To catch a sneak
Page 128

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Note: indicia on
page 143

FICTION

Surveillance BY JEFFERY DEAVER 4

The Vampire Theme
BY EDWARD D. HOCH 23

Excuse Me, I Have Murdered My Wife
BY PETER TURNBULL 35

The Blind Woman BY JANICE LAW 52

The Oedipus Variation
BY ANTONY MANN 62

The Letter
BY DOROTHY SALISBURY DAVIS 72

Heritage Trail BY BUDGE BURGESS 102

The Devil That Walks at Noonday
BY RALPH MCINERNY 119

Secondary Smoke
BY JEFFREY T. WILLIAMSON 128

The Wagon Mound BY VAL MCDERMID ... 137

DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

A Walk in the Park BY J.M. TAYLOR 92

REVIEWS

The Jury Box BY JON L. BREEN 49

POETRY

A Lead Pipe Cinch BY DEVONA R. WYANT ... 71

Blank Check BY TERRY LERDALL FITTERER
& KATHERINE H. BROOKS 136

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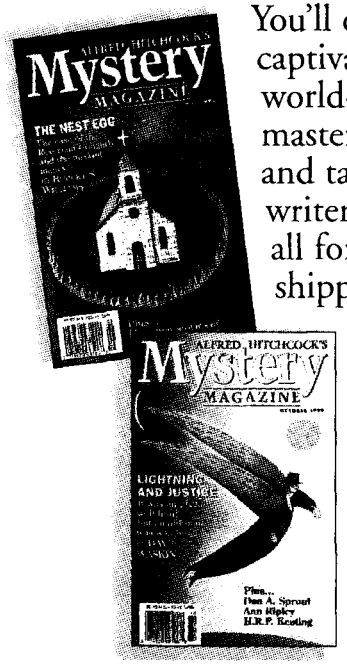

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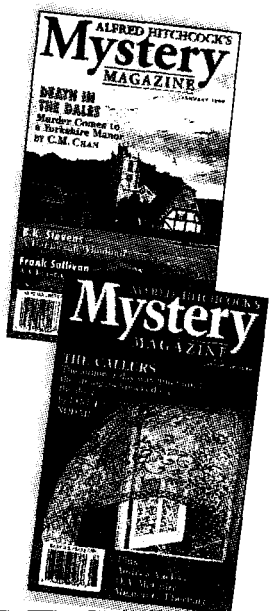

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SURVEILLANCE

by Jeffery Deaver

The knocking on the door not only woke Jake Muller from an afternoon nap but it told him immediately who his visitor was.

Not a polite single rap, not a friendly Morse code, but a repeated slamming of the brass knocker. Three times, four, six.

Oh man, not again.

Rolling his solid body from the couch, Muller paused for a moment to slip into a slightly higher level of wakefulness. It was five P.M. and he'd been gardening all day—until about an hour ago when a Dutch beer and the warmth of a May afternoon had lulled him to sleep. He now flicked on the pole lamp and walked unsteadily to the door, pulled it open.

The slim man in a blue suit and sporting thick, well-crafted politician's hair brushed past Muller and strode into the living room. Behind him was an older, burlier man in tweedy brown.

"Detective," Muller muttered to the man in blue.

Lieutenant William Carnegie didn't reply. He sat on the couch as if he'd just stepped away from it for a trip to the bathroom.

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"Who're you?" Muller asked the other one bluntly.

"Sergeant Hager."

"You don't need to see his ID, Jake, do you?" Carnegie said.

Muller yawned. He'd wanted the couch but the cop was sitting stiffly in the middle of it so he took the uncomfortable chair instead. Hager didn't sit down. He crossed his arms and looked around the dim room, then let his vision settle on Muller's faded blue jeans, dusty white socks, and a T-shirt advertising a local clam dive. His gardening clothes.

Yawning again and brushing his short, sandy hair into place, Muller asked, "You're not here to arrest me, right? Because you would've done that already. So, what do you want?"

Jeffery Deaver's novels have appeared on a number of best-seller lists around the world, including those of the *New York Times*, the *London Times*, and the *Los Angeles Times*. The author of seventeen thrillers, he's been nominated for four Edgar Awards from the Mystery Writers of America and is a two-time recipient of *EQMM*'s Readers Award. Mr. Deaver's most recent novel, *The Stone Monkey*, is now available in bookstores. †

Carnegie's trim hand disappeared into his trim suit jacket and returned with a notebook, which he consulted. "Just wanted to let you know, Jake—we found out about your bank accounts at West Coast Federal in Portland."

"And how'd you do that? You have a court order?"

"You don't need a court order for some things."

Sitting back, Muller wondered if they'd put some kind of tap on his computer—that was how he'd set up the accounts last week. Annandale's Major Crimes Division, he'd learned, was very high-tech; he'd been under intense surveillance over the past several months.

Living in a fishbowl . . .

He noticed that the tweedy cop was surveying the inside of Muller's modest bungalow.

"No, Sergeant Haver—"

"Hager."

"—I don't look like I'm living in luxury, if that's what you were observing. Because I'm not. Tell me, did you work the Anco case?"

The sergeant didn't need the glance from his boss to know to keep mum.

Muller continued, "But you *do* know that the burglar netted five hundred thousand and change. Now if—like Detective Carnegie here thinks—I was the one who stole the money, wouldn't I be living in something a little nicer than this?"

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"Not if you were smart," the sergeant muttered, and decided to sit down.

"Not if I were smart," Muller repeated and laughed.

Detective Carnegie looked around the dim living room and added, "This, we figure, is sort of a safehouse. You probably have some real nice places overseas."

"I wish."

"Well, don't we all agree that you're not your typical Annandale resident?"

In fact, Jake Muller *was* a bit of an oddball in this wealthy Southern California town. He'd suddenly appeared here about six months ago to oversee some business deals in the area. He was single, traveled a lot, had a vague career (he owned companies that bought and sold other companies was how he explained it). He made good money but had picked for his residence this modest house, which, as they'd just established, was nowhere close to luxurious.

So when Detective William Carnegie's clever police computer compiled a list of everyone who'd moved to town not long before the Anco Armored Delivery heist four months ago, Muller earned suspect status. And as the cop began to look more closely at Muller, the evidence got better and better. He had no alibi for the hours of the heist. The tire treads on the getaway car were similar to those on Muller's Lexus. Carnegie also found that Muller had a degree in electrical engineering; the burglar in the Anco case had dismantled a sophisticated alarm system to get into the cash storage room.

Even better, though, from Carnegie's point of view, was the fact that Muller had a record: a juvenile conviction for grand theft auto and an arrest ten years ago on some complicated money-laundering scheme at a company he was doing business with. Though the charges against Muller were dropped, Carnegie believed he was let go only on a technicality. Oh, he knew in his heart that Muller was behind the Anco theft, and he went after the businessman zealously—with the same energy that had made him a celebrity among the citizens of Annandale. Since Carnegie had been appointed head of Major Crimes two years ago, robberies, drug sales, and gang activities had dropped by half. Annandale had the lowest crime rate of any town in the area. He was also well liked among prosecutors—he made airtight cases against his suspects.

But on the Anco case he stumbled. Just after he'd arrested Jake Muller last month a witness came forward and said the man seen leaving the Anco grounds just after the robbery didn't look at all like Muller. Carnegie asserted that a smart perp like Muller would use a disguise for the getaway. But a state's attorney

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decided there was no case against him and ordered the businessman released.

Carnegie fumed at the embarrassment and the blot on his record. So when no other leads panned out, the detective returned to Muller with renewed fervor. He kept digging into the businessman's life and slowly began shoring up the case with circumstantial evidence: Muller frequently played golf on a course next to Anco headquarters—the perfect place for staking out the company—and he owned an acetylene torch that was powerful enough to cut through the loading-dock door at Anco. The detective used this information to bully his captain into beefing up surveillance on Muller.

Hence, the interrupted nap today with the stop-the-presses information about Muller's accounts.

"So what about the Portland money, Jake?"

"What about it?"

"Where'd the money come from?"

"I stole the crown jewels. No, wait, it was the Great Northfield Train Robbery. Okay, I lied. I knocked over a casino in Vegas."

William Carnegie sighed and momentarily lowered his lids, which ended with perfect, delicate lashes.

The businessman asked, "What about that other suspect? The highway worker? You were going to check him out."

Around the time of the heist a man in a public-works jumpsuit was seen pulling a suitcase from some bushes near the Anco main gate. A passing driver thought this looked suspicious and noted the license plate of the public-works truck, relaying the information to the Highway Patrol. The truck, which had been stolen a week before in Bakersfield, was later found abandoned at Orange County's John Wayne airport.

Muller's lawyer had contended that this man was the robber and that Carnegie should pursue him.

"Didn't have any luck finding him," the Annandale detective said.

"You mean," Muller grumbled, "that it was a long shot, he's out of the jurisdiction, and it's a hell of a lot easier to roust me than it is to find the real thief." He snapped, "Goddamn it, Carnegie, the only thing I've ever done wrong in my life was listening to a couple of buddies I shouldn't have when I was seventeen. We borrowed—"

" 'Borrowed'?"

"—a car for two hours and we paid the price. I just don't get why you're riding me like this."

But in truth, Muller knew the answer to that perfectly well. In his long and varied career, he'd met a number of men and women like self-disciplined William Carnegie. They were machines powered by mindless ambition to take down whoever they believed was their competitor or enemy. They were different from people

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like Muller himself, who are ambitious, yes, but whose excitement comes from the game itself. The Carnegies of the world were ruled solely by their need to win; the process was nothing to them.

"Can you prove the funds came from a legitimate source?" the sergeant asked formally.

Muller looked at Carnegie. "What happened to your other assistant, Detective? What was his name? Carl? I liked him. He didn't last too long."

Carnegie had gone through two assistants in the time he'd been after Jake Muller. Muller supposed that though the citizenry and the reporters were impressed with the obsessive-compulsive cop, he'd make his coworkers' lives miserable.

"Okay," the detective said. "If you're not going to talk, that's just the way it is. Oh, but I should let you know: We've got some information we're looking at right now. It's very interesting."

"Ah, more of your surveillance?"

"Maybe."

"And what exactly did you find?"

"Let's just call it interesting."

Muller said, " 'Interesting.' You said that twice. Hey, you want a beer? You, Sergeant?"

Carnegie answered for both of them. "No."

Muller fetched a Heineken from the kitchen. He continued. "So what you're saying is that after you've gone over this interesting information you'll have enough evidence to arrest me for real this time. But if I confess, it'll go a lot easier. Right?"

"Come on, Jake. Nobody was hurt at Anco. You'll do, what, five years. You're a young guy. It'd be a church social for you."

Muller nodded for a moment, drank a good bit of beer. Then said seriously, "But if I confessed then I'd have to give the money back, right?"

Carnegie froze for a moment. Then he smiled. "I'm not going to stop until I nail you, Jake. You know that." He said to the sergeant, "Let's go. This's a waste of time."

"At last there's something we agree on," Muller offered, and closed the door after them.

The next day, William Carnegie, wearing a perfectly pressed gray suit, white shirt, and striped red tie, strode into the watch room of the Annandale police station, Hager behind him.

He nodded at the eight officers sitting in the cheap fiberglass chairs. The men and women fell silent as the detective surveyed his troops.

Coffee was sipped, pencils tapped, pads doodled upon.

Watches glanced at.

"We're going to make a push on the case. I went to see Muller

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yesterday. I lit a fire under him and it had an effect: Last night I was monitoring his e-mail and he made a wire transfer of fifty thousand dollars from a bank in Portland to a bank in Lyon, France. I'm convinced he's getting ready to flee the jurisdiction."

Carnegie had managed to get level-two surveillance on Muller. This high-tech approach to investigations involved establishing real-time links to his on-line service provider and the computers at Muller's credit card companies, banks, cell phone service, and the like. Anytime Muller made a purchase, went on-line, made a call, withdrew cash, and so on, the officers on the Anco team would know almost instantly.

"Big Brother's going to be watching everything our boy's doing."

"Who?" asked one of the younger cops.

"1984?" Carnegie responded, astonished that the man hadn't heard of the novel. "The book?" he asked sarcastically. When the officer continued to stare blankly, he added, "Big Brother was the government. It watched everything the citizens did." He nodded at a nearby dusty computer terminal and then turned back to the officers. "You, me, and Big Brother—we're closing the net on Muller." Noting the stifled grins, he wished he'd been a bit less dramatic. But damn it, didn't they realize that Annandale had become the laughing stock of Southern California law enforcers for not closing the Anco case? The CHP, the LAPD, and even the cops in small towns nearby couldn't believe that the Annandale Police, despite having the biggest per capita budget of any town in Orange County, hadn't collared a single perp in the heist.

Carnegie divided the group into three teams and assigned them to shifts at the computer workstations, with orders to relay to him instantly everything that Muller did.

As he was walking back to his office to look further at Muller's wire transfer to France he heard a voice. "Hey, Dad?"

He turned to see his son striding down the corridor toward him, dressed in his typical seventeen-year-old's uniform: earrings, shabby Tomb Raider T-shirt, and pants so baggy they looked like they'd fall off at any moment. And the hair: spiked up and dyed a garish yellow. Still, Billy was an above-average student and nothing like the troublemakers that Carnegie dealt with in an official capacity.

"What're you doing here?" he asked. It was early May. School should be in session, shouldn't it?

"It's parent-teacher day, remember? You and Mom're supposed to meet Mr. Gibson at ten. I came by to make sure you'd be there."

Damn . . . Carnegie'd forgotten about the meeting. And he was supposed to have a conference call with two investigators in France about Muller's wire transfer. That was set for nine forty-five. If he postponed it, the French policemen wouldn't be available later because of the time difference and the call would have

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to be delayed until tomorrow.

"I've got it on my calendar," the detective said absently; something had begun to nag at his thoughts. What was it? He added to his son, "I just might be a little late."

"Dad, it's important," Billy said.

"I'll be there."

Then the thought that had been buzzing around Carnegie's consciousness settled. "Billy, are you still taking French?"

His son blinked. "Yeah, you signed my report card, don't you remember?"

"Who's your teacher?"

"Mrs. Vandell."

"Is she at school now?"

"I guess. Yeah, probably. Why?"

"I need her to help me with a conference call. You go on home now. Tell your mother I'll be at the meeting as soon as I can."

Carnegie left the boy standing in the middle of the hallway and jogged to his office, so excited about the brainstorm of using the French teacher to help him translate that he nearly collided with a workman hunched over one of the potted plants in the corridor, trimming leaves.

"Sorry," he called, and hurried into his office. He phoned Billy's French teacher and when he told her how important the case was she reluctantly agreed to help him translate. The conference call went off as scheduled, and the woman's translation efforts were a huge help; without his brainstorm to use the woman he couldn't have communicated with the two officers at all. Still, the investigators in France reported that they'd found no impropriety in Muller's investments or financial dealings. He paid taxes and had never run into any trouble with the gendarmes.

Carnegie asked if they had tapped his phone and were monitoring his on-line and banking activities.

There was a pause and then one of the officers responded. Billy's French teacher translated, "They say, 'We are not so high-tech as you. We prefer to catch criminals the old-fashioned way.'" They did agree to alert their customs agents to check Muller's luggage carefully the next time he was in the country.

Carnegie thanked the two men and the teacher, then hung up.

We prefer to catch criminals the old-fashioned way. . . .

Which is why we'll get him and you won't, thought the detective as he spun around in his chair and began staring intently at Big Brother's computer monitor once again.

Jake Muller stepped out of the department store in downtown Annandale, following the young man he'd noticed in the jewelry department.

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The boy kept his head down and walked quickly away from the store.

When they were passing an alleyway Muller suddenly jogged forward, grabbed the skinny kid by the arm, and pulled him into the shadows.

"Jesus," he whispered in shock.

Muller pinned him up against the wall. "Don't think about running." A glance toward the boy's pockets. "And don't think about anything else."

"I don't—" the boy said with a quivering voice, "I don't have a gun or anything."

"What's your name?"

"I—"

"Name?" Muller barked.

"Sam. Sam Phillips. Like, whatta you want?"

"Give me the watch."

The boy sighed and rolled his eyes.

"Give it to me. You don't want me to have to take it off you." Muller outweighed the boy by fifty pounds.

The kid reached into his pocket and handed him the Seiko that Muller had seen him lift off the counter at the store. Muller took it.

"Who're you? Security? A cop?"

Muller eyed him carefully and then pocketed the watch. "You were clumsy. If the guard hadn't been taking a leak he would've caught you."

"What guard?"

"That's my point. The little guy in the ratty jacket and dirty jeans."

"He was a security guard?"

"Yeah."

"How'd you spot him?"

Muller said grimly, "Let's say I've had my share of run-ins with guys like that."

The boy looked up for a moment, examined Muller, then resumed his study of the asphalt in the alley. "How'd you spot *me?*"

"Wasn't hard. You were skulking around the store like you'd already been busted."

"You gonna shake me down or something?"

Muller looked up and down the street cautiously. Then he said, "I need somebody to help me with this thing I've got going tomorrow."

"Why me?" the boy asked.

"There're some people who'd like to set me up."

"Cops?"

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"Just . . . some people." Muller nodded toward his pocket. "But since *I* spotted *you* boost this, I know you're not working for anybody."

"Whatta I have to do?"

"It's easy. I need a driver. A half-hour's work."

Part scared, part excited. "Like, how much?"

"I'll pay you five hundred."

Another examination of the scenery. "For a half-hour?"

Muller nodded.

"Damn. Five hundred?"

"That's right."

"What're we doing?" he asked, a little cautious now. "I mean, exactly."

"I've got to . . . pick up a few things at this place—a house on Tremont. I need you to park in the alley behind the house while I go inside for a few minutes."

The kid grinned. "So, you going to 'jack some stuff? This's a heist, right?"

Muller shushed him. "Even if it was, you think I'd say it out loud?"

"Sorry. I wasn't thinking." The boy squinted, then said, "Hey, there's this friend of mine? And we've got a connection. He's getting us some good stuff. I mean, way sweet. We can turn it around in a week. You come in with a thousand or two, he'll give us a better discount. You can double your money. You interested?"

"Drugs?"

"Yeah."

"I don't ever go near 'em. And you shouldn't, either. They'll screw up your life. Remember that. . . . Meet me tomorrow, okay?"

"When?"

"Noon. The corner of Seventh and Maple. Starbucks."

"I guess."

"Don't guess. Be there." Muller started to walk away.

"If this works out, you think maybe there'd be some more work for me?"

"I might be away for a while. But, yeah, maybe. If you handle it right."

"I do a good job, mister. Hey, what's *your* name?"

"You don't need to know that."

The kid nodded. "That's cool. Sure. . . . One other thing? What about the watch?"

"I'll dispose of the evidence for you."

After the kid was gone Muller walked slowly to the mouth of the alley and peeked out. No sign of Carnegie's surveillance team. He'd been careful to lose them, but they had this almost magical

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ability to appear from nowhere and nail him with their Big Ear mikes and telephoto lenses.

Pulling on his Oakland baseball cap and lowering his head, he stepped out of the alley and walked down the sidewalk fast, as if satellites were tracking his position from ten thousand miles in space.

The next morning William Carnegie was late coming into the office.

Since he'd screwed up by missing the parent-teacher meeting yesterday, he'd forced himself to have breakfast with his wife and Billy.

When he walked into the police station at nine-thirty Sergeant Hager told him, "Muller's been doing some shopping you ought to know about."

"What?"

"He left his house an hour ago. Our boys tailed him to the mall. They lost him, but not long after that we got a charge notice from one of his credit-card companies. At Books 'N' Java he bought six books. We don't know exactly what they were, but the product code from the store listed them as travel books. Then he left the mall and spent thirty-eight dollars for two boxes of nine-millimeter ammunition at Tyler's Gun Shop."

"Jesus. I always figured him for a shooter. The guards at Anco're lucky they didn't hear him breaking in; he would've taken them out, I know it. . . . Did the surveillance team pick him up again?"

"Nope. They went back to his house to wait."

"Got something else," called a young policewoman nearby. "He charged forty-four dollars' worth of tools at Home Depot."

Carnegie mused, "So, he's armed, and sounds like he's planning another heist. Then he's going to flee the state." Gazing at one of the computer screens, he asked absently, "What're you going after this time, Muller? A business, a house?"

Hager's phone rang. He answered and listened. "That was the babysitter in front of Muller's. He's back home. Only something funny. He was on foot. He must've parked up the street someplace." He listened some more. "They say there's a painting truck in his driveway. Maybe that's why."

"No. He's up to something. I don't trust anything that man does."

"Got another notice!" one officer called. "He just went on-line . . ." The police had no court order allowing them to view the content of what Muller downloaded, though they could observe the sites he was connected to. "Okay. He's on the Anderson & Cross Web site."

"The burglar alarm company?" Carnegie asked, his heart pounding with excitement.

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"Yep."

A few minutes later the officer called, "Now he's checking out TravelCentral dot com."

A service that let you make airline reservations on-line.

"Tell surveillance we'll let them know as soon as he goes off-line. They should be ready to move. I've got a feeling this's going to happen fast."

We've got you now, Carnegie thought. Then he laughed and looked at the computers affectionately.

Big Brother Is Watching You . . .

In the passenger seat of his car, Jake Muller nodded toward a high fence in an alleyway behind Tremont Street. "Sam, pull over there."

The car braked slowly to a stop.

"That's it, huh?" the nervous kid asked, nodding toward a white house on the other side of the fence.

"Yep. Now, listen. If a cop comes by, just drive off slow. Go around the block but turn left at the street. Got that? Stay off Tremont, whatever you do."

The boy asked uneasily, "You think somebody'll come by?"

"Let's hope not." Muller took the tools he'd just bought that morning out of the trunk, looked up and down the alley, then walked through the gate in the fence and disappeared around the side of the house.

He returned ten minutes later. He hurried through the gate, carrying a heavy box and a small shopping bag, disappeared again, and returned with several more boxes. He loaded everything in the back of the car and wiped sweat from his forehead, then dropped hard into the passenger's seat. "Let's get outta here."

"Where're the tools?"

"I left 'em back there. What're you waiting for? Go."

The kid hit the accelerator and the car jumped into the middle of the alley.

Soon they were on the freeway and Muller gave directions to a cheap motel on the far side of town, the Starlight Lodge. There Muller climbed out. He walked into the lobby and registered for two nights. He returned to the car. "Room One Twenty-nine. He said it's around the side, in the back."

They found the spot, parked, and climbed out. Muller handed the boy the room key. He opened the door and together they carried the boxes and the shopping bag inside.

"Kinda lame," the kid said, looking around.

"I won't be here that long."

Muller turned his back and opened the grocery bag. He extracted five one-hundred-dollar bills and handed them over. He

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added another twenty. "You'll have to take a cab back downtown."

"Man, looks like a good haul." Nodding at the bag of money.

Muller said nothing. He stuffed the bag into a suitcase, locked it, and slipped it under the bed.

The kid pocketed the bills.

"You did a good job today, Sam. Thanks."

"How'll I find you, mister? I mean, if you want to hire me again?"

"I'll leave a message at the Starbucks."

"Yeah. Good."

Muller glanced at his watch. He emptied his pockets on the dresser. "Now I gotta shower and go meet some people."

They shook hands. The boy left and Muller swung the door shut after him.

In the bathroom he turned the shower on full, the water hot. He leaned against the wobbly basin and watched the steam roll out of the stall like stormy clouds and wondered where his life was about to go.

"There's something screwy," Sergeant Hager called out.

"What?"

"A glitch of some kind." He nodded at one computer. "Muller's still on-line at his house. See? Only we just got an advisory from National Bank's credit-card computer. Somebody using Muller's card got a room at the Starlight Lodge on Simpson about forty-five minutes ago. There's gotta be a mistake. He—"

"Oh, Christ," Carnegie spat out. "There's no mistake. Muller left his computer on so we'd think he was home. *That's* why he parked the car around the corner. So our men wouldn't see him leave. He snuck through a side yard or out the back." Carnegie grabbed the phone and raged at the surveillance team that their subject had gotten away from them. He ordered them to check to make sure. He slammed the receiver down and a moment later a sheepish officer called back to confirm that the painters said Muller had left over an hour ago.

The detective sighed. "So while we were napping he knocked over the next target. I don't believe it. I just—"

"He just made another charge," a cop called. "Eighteen gallons of gas at the Mobil station on Lorenzo and Principale."

"Tanked it up." Carnegie nodded, considering this. "Maybe he's going to drive up to San Francisco to catch a flight. Or Arizona or Las Vegas, for that matter." Walking to the wall map, the detective stuck pins in the locations Hager had mentioned. He was calmer now. Muller may have guessed they'd be monitoring his on-line activity, but obviously didn't know the extent of their surveillance.

"Get a county unmarked to tail him."

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"Detective, just got a report from the speed-pass main computer," one of the officers across the room called. "Muller turned onto the Four-Oh-Eight at Stanton Road four minutes ago. He entered at the northbound tollbooth."

The little box on your windshield that automatically paid tolls on highways, bridges, and tunnels could report exactly when and where you used it.

Another pin was stabbed into the map.

Hager directed the pursuing officers to that interchange.

Fifteen minutes later, the cop monitoring the speed-pass computer called out once again, "He just turned off the tollway. At Markham Road. The eastbound tollbooth."

Eastbound into the Markham neighborhood? Carnegie reflected. Well, that made sense. This was a tough part of town, populated by rednecks and bikers living in ramshackle bungalows and trailers. If Muller had an accomplice, Markham would be a good source for that sort of muscle. And nearby was the desert, with thousands of square miles in which to hide the Anco loot.

"Still no visual yet," Hager said, listening on his phone to the pursuing officers.

"Damn. We're going to lose him."

But then another officer called, "I just got a ping from Muller's cell phone company—he's turned on the phone and's making a call. They're tracing it. . . ." A moment later he called out, "Okay. He's headed northbound on La Ciena."

Another blue-tipped pin in the map.

Hager relayed this information to the county cops. Then he listened and gave a laugh. "They've got the car! . . . Muller's pulling into the Desert Rose trailer park. . . . Okay . . . He's parking at one of the trailers. . . . Getting out . . . He's talking to a white male, thirties, shaved head, tattoos. . . . The male's nodding toward a shed on the back of the property. . . . They're walking back there together. . . . They're getting a package out of the shed. . . . Now they're going inside."

"That's good enough for me," Carnegie announced. "Tell 'em to stay out of sight. We'll be there in twenty minutes. Advise us if the suspect starts to leave."

As he started for the door, he said a silent prayer, thanking both the Lord—and Big Brother—for their help.

The drive took closer to forty minutes, but Jake Muller's car was still parked in front of the rusty, lopsided trailer.

The officers on the scene reported that the robber and his bald accomplice were still inside, presumably planning their escape from the jurisdiction.

The four police cars from headquarters were parked several

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trailers away, and nine Annandale cops, three armed with shotguns, were crouching behind sheds and weeds and rusty autos. Everybody kept low, mindful that Muller was armed.

Carnegie and Hager eased forward toward the trailer. They had to handle the situation carefully. Unless they could catch a glimpse of the Anco payroll money through the door or window, or unless Muller carried it outside in plain view, they had no probable cause to arrest him. They circled the place but couldn't see in; the door was closed and the curtains drawn.

Hell, Carnegie thought, discouraged. Maybe they could—

But then fate intervened.

"Smell that?" Carnegie asked in a whisper.

Hager frowned. "What?"

"Coming from inside."

The sergeant inhaled deeply. "Pot or hash," he said, nodding.

This would give them probable cause to enter.

"Let's do it," Hager whispered. And he gestured for the other officers to join him.

One of the tactical cops asked if he should do the kick-in but Carnegie shook his head. "Nope. He's mine." He took off his suit jacket and strapped on a bulletproof vest, then drew his automatic pistol.

Gazing at the other officers, he mouthed, "Ready?"

They nodded.

The detective held up three fingers, then bent them down one at a time.

One . . . two . . .

"Go!"

He shouldered open the door and rushed into the trailer, the other officers right behind him.

"Freeze, freeze, police!" he shouted, looking around, squinting to see better in the dim light.

The first thing he noticed was a large plastic bag of pot sitting by the doorway.

The second thing was that the tattooed man's visitor wasn't Jake Muller at all; it was Carnegie's own son, Billy.

The detective stormed into the Annandale police station, flanked by Sergeant Hager. Behind them was another officer, escorting the sullen, handcuffed boy.

The owner of the trailer—a biker with a history of drug offenses—had been taken down the hall to Narcotics and the kilo of weed booked into evidence.

Carnegie had ordered Billy to tell them what was going on, but he'd clammed up and refused to say a word. A search of the property and of Muller's car had yielded no evidence of the Anco loot.

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He'd gotten a frosty reaction from the Orange County troopers who'd been tailing Muller's car when he'd raged at them about misidentifying his son as the businessman. ("Don't recall you ever bothered to put his picture out on the wire, Detective," one of them reminded him.)

Carnegie now barked to one of the officers sitting at a computer screen, "Get me Jake Muller."

"You don't have to," an officer said. "He's right over there."

Muller was sitting across from the desk sergeant. He rose and looked in astonishment at Carnegie and his son. He pointed to the boy and said sourly, "So they got you already, Sam. That was fast. I just filled out the complaint five minutes ago."

"Sam?" Carnegie asked.

"Yeah, Sam Phillips," Muller said.

"His name's Billy. He's my son," Carnegie muttered. The boy's middle name was Samuel, and Phillips was the maiden name of the detective's wife.

"Your son?" Muller asked, eyes wide in disbelief. He then glanced at what one officer was carrying—an evidence box containing the suitcase, wallet, keys, and cell phone that had been found in Muller's car. "You recovered everything," he said. "How's my car? Did he wreck it?"

Hager started to tell him that his car was fine but Carnegie waved his hand to silence the big cop. "Okay, what the hell is going on?" he asked Muller. "What'd you have to do with my boy?"

Angry, Muller said, "Hey, this kid robbed *me*. I was just trying to do him a favor. I had no idea he was your son."

"Favor?"

Muller eyed the boy up and down. "Yesterday I saw him steal a watch from Maxwell's, over on Harrison Street."

Carnegie turned a cold eye on his son, who continued to keep his head down.

"I followed him and made him give me the watch. I felt bad for him. He seemed like he was having a tough time of it. I hired him to help me out for an hour or so. I just wanted to show him there were people out there who'd pay good money for legitimate work."

"What'd you do with the watch?" Carnegie asked.

Muller looked indignant. "Returned it to the shop. What'd you think? I'd keep stolen merchandise?"

The detective glanced at his son and demanded, "What did he hire you to do?"

When the boy said nothing, Muller explained. "I paid him to watch my car while I moved a few things out of my house."

"*Your* house?" the boy asked in shock. "On Tremont?"

To his father Muller said, "That's right. I moved into a motel for

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a few days—I'm having my house painted and I can't sleep with the paint fumes."

The truck in Muller's driveway, Carnegie recalled.

"I couldn't use the front door," Muller added angrily, "because I'm sick of those goons of yours tailing me every time I leave the house. I hired your son to stay with the car in the alley; it's a tow zone back there. You can't leave your car unattended even for five minutes. I dropped off some tools I bought this morning and picked up a few things I needed and we drove to the motel." Muller shook his head. "I gave him the key to open the door, and I forgot to get it when he left. He came back when I was in the shower and ripped me off. My car, my cell phone, money, wallet, the suitcase." In disgust he added, "Hell, and here I gave him all that money. And practically begged him to get his act together and stay clear of drugs."

"He told you that?" Carnegie asked.

The boy nodded reluctantly.

His father sighed and nodded at the suitcase. "What's in there?"

Muller shrugged, picked up his keys, and unlocked and opened the case.

Carnegie supposed that the businessman wouldn't be so cooperative if it contained the Anco loot, but he still felt a burst of delight when he noticed that the paper bag inside was filled with cash.

His excitement faded, though, when he saw it held only about three or four hundred dollars, mostly wadded-up ones and fives.

"Household money," Muller explained. "I didn't want to leave it in the house. Not with the painters there."

Carnegie contemptuously tossed the bag into the case and angrily slammed the lid. "Jesus."

"You thought it was the Anco money?"

Carnegie looked at the computer terminals around them, cursors blinking passively.

Goddamn Big Brother. . . . The best surveillance money could buy. And look what had happened.

The detective's voice cracked with emotion as he said, "You followed my son! You hired the painters so you could get away without being seen, you bought the bullets, the tools. . . . And what the hell were you doing looking at burglar-alarm Web sites?"

"Comparative shopping," Muller answered reasonably. "I'm buying an alarm system for the house."

"This is all a setup! You—"

The businessman silenced him by glancing at Carnegie's fellow officers, who were looking at their boss with mixed expressions of concern and distaste over his paranoid ranting. Muller nodded

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toward Carnegie's office. "How 'bout you and I go in there? Have a chat."

Inside, Muller swung the door shut and turned to face the glowering detective. "Here's the situation, Detective. I'm the only prosecuting witness in the larceny and auto-theft case against your son. That's a felony, and if I decide to press charges he'll do some serious time, particularly since I suspect you found him in the company of some not-so-savory friends when he was busted. Then there's also the little matter of Dad's career trajectory after his son's arrest hits the papers."

"You want a deal?"

"Yeah, I want a deal. I'm sick of this delusion crap of yours, Carnegie. I'm a legitimate businessman. I didn't steal the Anco payroll. I'm not a thief and never have been."

He eyed the detective carefully, then reached into his pocket and handed Carnegie a slip of paper.

"What's this?"

"The number of a Coastal Air flight four months ago—the afternoon of the Anco robbery."

"How'd you get this?"

"My companies do some business with the airlines. I pulled some strings and the head of security at Coastal got me that number. One of the passengers in first class on that flight paid cash for a one-way ticket from John Wayne Airport to Chicago four hours after the Anco robbery. He had no checked baggage. Only carry-on. They wouldn't give me the passenger's name, but that shouldn't be too tough for a hard-working cop like you to track down."

Carnegie stared at the paper. "The guy from the Department of Public Works? The one the witness saw with that suitcase near Anco?"

"Maybe it's a coincidence, Detective. But I know I didn't steal the money. Maybe *he* did."

The paper disappeared into Carnegie's pocket. "What do you want?"

"Drop me as a suspect. Cut out all the surveillance. I want my life back. And I want a letter signed by you stating that the evidence proves I'm not guilty."

"That won't mean anything in court."

"But it'll look pretty bad if anybody decides to come after me again."

"Bad for my job, you mean."

"That's exactly what I mean."

After a moment Carnegie muttered, "How long've you been planning this out?"

Muller said nothing. But he reflected: Not that long, actually. He'd started thinking about it just after the two cops had inter-

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rupted his nap the other day.

He'd wire-transferred some money from an investment account to one of his banks in France, to fuel the cops' belief that he was getting ready to flee the country (the French accounts were completely legit; only a fool would hide loot in Europe).

Then he'd done some surveillance of his own, low-tech though it was. He'd pulled on overalls, glasses, and a hat and snuck into police headquarters, armed with a watering can and clippers to tend to the plants he'd noticed inside the station the first time he was arrested. He'd spent a half-hour on his knees, his head down, clipping and watering, in the hallway outside the watch room, where he'd learned the extent of the police's electronic invasion of his life. He'd heard, too, the exchange between Billy Carnegie and the detective—a classic example of an uninvolved father and a troubled, angry son.

Muller smiled to himself now, recalling that after the meeting Carnegie had been so focused on the case that when he nearly tripped over Muller in the corridor, the cop never noticed who the gardener was.

He'd then followed Billy for a few hours until he caught him palming the watch. Then he tricked the boy into helping him. He'd hired the painters to do some interior touch-up—to give him the excuse to park his car elsewhere and to check into the motel. Then, using their surveillance against them, he'd bought the travel books, the bullets, and the tools, and logged onto the alarm and travel agency Web sites in order to fool the cops into believing he was indeed the Anco burglar and was getting ready to do one last heist and flee the state. At the motel he'd tempted Billy Carnegie into stealing the suitcase, credit cards, phone, and car—everything that would let the cops track the kid and nail him red-handed.

He now said to Carnegie, "I'm sorry, Detective, but you didn't leave me any choice. You just weren't ever going to believe that I'm innocent."

"You used my son."

Muller shrugged. "No harm done. Look on the good side—his first bust and he picked a victim who's willing to drop the charges. Anybody else, he wouldn't've been so lucky."

Carnegie glanced through the blinds at his son, standing forlorn by Hager's desk.

"He's savable, Detective," Muller said. "If you want to save him. . . . So, do we have a deal?"

A disgusted sigh was followed by a disgusted nod.

Outside the police station, Muller tossed the suitcase into the back of his car, which had been towed to the station by a police truck.

He drove back to his house and walked inside. The workmen

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had apparently just finished and the smell of paint was strong. He went through the ground floor, opening windows to air the place out.

Strolling into his garden, he surveyed the huge pile of mulch, whose spreading had been postponed because of his interrupted nap. The businessman glanced at his watch. He had some phone calls to make but decided to put them off for another day; he was in the mood to garden. He changed clothes, went into the garage, and picked up a glistening new shovel, part of his purchases that morning at Home Depot. He began meticulously spreading the black and brown mulch throughout the large garden.

After an hour of work he paused for a beer. Sitting under a maple tree, sipping the Heineken, he surveyed the empty street in front of his house—where Carnegie had stationed the surveillance team for the past few months. Man, it felt good not to be spied on any longer.

His eyes then slid to a small rock sitting halfway between a row of corn stalks and some tomato vines. Three feet beneath it was a bag containing the $543,300 from Anco Armored Delivery, which he'd buried there the afternoon of the robbery, just before he'd ditched the public-works uniform and driven the stolen truck to Orange County airport for the flight to Chicago under a false name—a precautionary trip, in case he needed to lead investigators off on a false trail, as it turned out he'd had to do, thanks to compulsive Detective Carnegie.

Jake Muller planned all of his heists out to the finest of details; this was why he'd never been caught after nearly fifteen years as a thief.

He'd wanted to send the cash to his bagman in Miami for months—Muller hated it when heist money wasn't earning interest—but with Carnegie breathing down his neck, he hadn't dared. Should he dig it up now and send it off?

No, he decided; it was best to wait till dark.

Besides, the weather was warm, the sky was clear, and there was nothing like gardening on a beautiful spring day. Muller finished his beer, picked up the shovel, and returned to the pile of pungent mulch. ●

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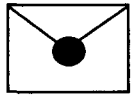

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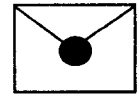

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THE VAMPIRE THEME

by Edward D. Hoch

Michael Vlado was always pleased to see his old friend Segar, though the former police captain rarely visited the Gypsy village since his promotion to a top security post in the Romanian government.

"I like to come here," he told Michael on this late-summer's day when the sky was a clear blue dotted only with a few lazy clouds. They were walking back to the corral where some of the foals were frisking with the mares. "It is only that I find too few excuses to venture into the mountains from Bucharest. It is a vast modern city now. You should visit us."

Michael smiled at him. "Perhaps I will. But what excuse did you find today, old friend?"

"I am driving across the Carpathians to the town of Sighisoara. Have you ever been there?"

"I have passed through it. Your maps will tell you my farm is about the halfway point. But there is nothing in Sighisoara to interest state security."

"Would you believe me if I told you the good people there are building a theme park to compete for tourist money by luring busloads of visitors there?"

"Surely not a Transylvanian Disneyland."

Segar chuckled. "You are not far off. It is to be a vampire theme park costing the equivalent of thirty million American dollars, most of it locally financed. If an agreement can be reached with Universal Pictures, the company that controls the rights to the film interpretation of Count Dracula, he will be celebrated with a roller coaster and haunted house. If they can't get the Dracula

As with several other stories Edward D. Hoch has written for us recently, this one started with a news item. Romania really is building a vampire theme park, he learned. The Michael Vlado series is one of Mr. Hoch's best; happily, a new collection featuring the Gypsy-sleuth will be available around the time this issue mails: See *The Iron Angel and Other Gypsy Tales of Michael Vlado*, Crippen & Landru Publishers. †

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rights, they plan to use Vlad the Impaler, from medieval history."

"Perhaps he was a relative of mine," Michael Vlado said with a chuckle. "I can sell them the rights. But what does this have to do with security?"

"Anything that might bring thousands of tourists a year into the country has to do with security, Michael. Do you want to come along?"

"Stay over tonight for one of Rosanna's fine dinners," he decided. "In the morning I will drive to Sighisoara with you."

Michael's village of Gravita was in the foothills on the southern side of the Transylvanian Alps. In order to reach Sighisoara on the northern side they had to drive through the mountain pass that led through Brasov. It was a lonely journey with only occasional sightings of other cars. Michael could understand why Segar had desired companionship, and yet he had a suspicion that something else was involved. Surely Romania's security police must have small planes at their disposal for a 150-mile journey over the mountains. Segar would not have driven through Gravita unless he wanted Michael to accompany him.

"Are there any Roms involved in this theme park?" he asked Segar casually as they were driving through Brasov. They'd left his village at daybreak, around five o'clock, in hopes of reaching their destination well before noon. The mountain roads were not conducive to speeding.

"One of the chief backers is Saxon Medias. Do you know him?"

"Only by name. I wouldn't call him a true Rom. He has denied his Gypsy blood on more than one occasion when it suits his business interests."

"That may be a wise move on his part," Segar suggested. "Feeling is running against Gypsies in many countries these days."

"Mainly because they move around and cross national boundaries. The Rom who live in my foothill villages are not nomadic. We have been content there for generations. That is true of most Romanian Gypsies, as you know."

"Medias considers himself a businessman of the modern world. He spends much of his time in Vienna. To be associated with the legendary trickery and dishonesty of Gypsies would be fatal to his image."

Michael gazed out at the passing scene, where farmland was beginning to replace the rocky mountain crags. "What part does he play in this business?"

"He owns the land and will be a partner in the enterprise. Construction has already begun, and Medias maintains an office and home there. Most townspeople are in favor of the plan, but it was felt that the central government should have a voice in it, too. You

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know the Gypsy mind better than anyone I know, Michael. I'd like your opinion of him."

Soon they were in sight of the houses and buildings of Sighisoara, and Segar drove past fields of corn and occasional grape arbors. A vast area of farmland was being excavated for the project. "They hope to have it open by next year," he said. A sign by the road, flanking a field of sunflowers, read in quaint antique lettering: *Future Home of Vampire Land! Keeping Our Heritage Alive for the Next Generation!*

Michael shook his head. "Are they serious about this?"

"As serious as thirty million American dollars."

"I'm surprised they haven't been laughed out of the country! Somehow the idea of a vampire roller coaster in the middle of Romania seems—" He broke off as they rounded a corner and came upon a car wreck at the side of the road. A police car and an ambulance were already on the scene. It appeared the car had gone into a ditch.

"I'd better stop," Segar decided.

He showed the police officer his identity card and asked what had happened. "Car went off the road, sir," the officer responded, respectful of Segar's position. "The driver's dead. We haven't removed the body yet."

Michael peered in the window of the car. There was broken glass from one of the side windows on the seat, and the body of a short middle-aged man had a number of facial lacerations as well as a gash in his throat. Oddly, there was no blood visible in the car. "Something's wrong here," he said quietly to Segar.

"What's that?"

"Look for yourself. No blood."

Segar frowned. "What does that mean?"

"They'd better examine the body. Either he was killed somewhere else, or the vampire has come early to Sighisoara."

The dead man's name was Otto Critsaller. He was an Austrian developer who'd come from Vienna for meetings regarding the theme park. He'd been in Sighisoara for two days and apparently was on his way home at the time of the accident. Except that it wasn't an accident. Men with no blood in their bodies don't drive cars.

No one had seen the car go off the road and into the ditch. A passing farmer noticed it shortly before eight o'clock and notified the police. They learned this much when Segar telephoned the local authorities shortly before their afternoon meeting with Saxon Medias. They also confirmed Michael's suspicion that the body had very little blood remaining in it. "That didn't happen at the scene," Michael insisted. "Someone stopped him on his way

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home, killed him, drained his blood, and drove the car off the road."

"His wallet and money were still on him. There was no luggage in the trunk, only a cooler with a little water in it. That doesn't look as if he was headed home. But why would anyone do that? To publicize their vampire theme park?"

"Perhaps Saxon Medias can tell us when we see him," Michael suggested.

They met him at his makeshift office in the town hall, surrounded by plans and models for Vampire Land. Medias was a large man with piercing brown eyes and a bald head that seemed to be polished. He looked more like a wrestler than a business entrepreneur, but then Michael noticed a gold earring that matched his own and decided he was trying to be a Gypsy after all. When Segar introduced Michael as a Gypsy king, the large man smiled. "I knew you were one of us. Where are your people?"

"In Gravita, in the foothills north of Bucharest."

He nodded sagely, lighting a long Russian cigarette as he spoke. "Is vampire lore prevalent in your area?"

Michael told him, "I know of no one in our village who would cross the mountains to ride on a Dracula roller coaster."

"No, no!" Saxon Medias assured him. "That is for the tourists. I mean the real vampire lore. Have your people been visited in the nighttime?"

"Only by an occasional owl." Michael thought it wise not to mention the bats that sometimes hovered over his horse barn at dusk.

The man's brown eyes seemed to drill into him. "Then you are not a believer?"

"In many things, but not in vampires."

"I wasn't, either, in my younger days. Are you aware that a man was found dead here this very morning with most of the blood drained from his body?"

"We came upon the scene while driving in this morning," Segar told him. "Did you know him?"

Medias nodded. "Otto Critsaller from Vienna. I met with him yesterday. He was one of several contractors bidding on construction of our theme park. The site preparation and foundation work are already under way, but the main contractor has yet to be chosen."

"You mention the lack of blood," Segar remarked, reverting to his former days as a police investigator. "Do you really believe he was killed by a bloodsucking vampire?"

The Gypsy entrepreneur hesitated before he answered. "As a businessman I welcome the publicity. I would like nothing better than to have newspapers all over Europe report the story. What better way to publicize Vampire Land?" He allowed himself a slight smile. "But as a practical man I believe poor Critsaller was

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beaten and robbed somewhere else. He simply bled to death and the body was placed in his car to make it look like an unfortunate accident."

"His money wasn't taken," Segar said. "It doesn't look like robbery. Did you know him well?"

"I met him in Vienna and he'd been here three or four times before, discussing the project. A fascinating man, claimed to be an illegitimate descendant of Queen Victoria through a liaison her son Leopold had with a French girl in Paris in eighteen eighty-two. He really wanted the job, but there's a Romanian company and a Russian one who are also bidding."

He led them over to a table in one corner of the office where an elaborate scale model of the planned theme park was displayed. "We saw the land being cleared on our way in," Michael told him. "Do you really expect to have this built and open to the public by next year?"

"Not for the summer tourist season, I fear. The construction bids won't be in for another month. It depends upon the severity of the winter, but more likely it will be late next year at the very best."

"Will Critsaller's murder delay things?"

"It shouldn't. His firm was never more than an outside possibility."

A young dark-haired woman with a sturdy frame and thick legs entered the office with some papers. "The local police wish to speak to you when you're free," she told him.

"Thank you, Hilda." He turned back to them with a sigh. "I can see very little will be accomplished today. Just what was it that brought you here, Mr. Segar?"

"Security concerns. That is my job. As I understand it, you plan to bring a great many tourists into the country on bus tours."

"We hope to. A hotel chain has already expressed interest in building lodgings, although in its first stage the park will be compact enough to be experienced in a single day."

Segar made some notes. "There would not be any overnight visitors?"

"It's doubtful, until we put in more rides and attractions. To start, we will have the roller coaster, the haunted house, a golf course, and a small zoo. Something for the tourists, and for the local people as well." He pointed to the model. "In this area we'll have a medieval Main Street for shopping and entertainment events."

"There can't be many golfers in town."

The large man waved away the objection. "More people are taking it up. The new government has changed the way we live. Romania has entered the twenty-first century. I envision this town becoming a busy city someday."

Segar pondered that. "There's a feeling in Bucharest that you may be blurring the line between Transylvanian history and fiction."

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"Some of our people are upset with the plans," Medias admitted. "Dr. Warsaw, a local physician, is leading a campaign against the theme park. However, I feel this is a way of honoring our heritage. I am not talking of the Dracula movies from Hollywood but rather our entire medieval history back to Vlad the Impaler."

"I think small children would find Dracula less scary than Vlad," Michael told him. "And I say that as one who bears a form of his name."

They talked for some time while Segar made occasional notes. Finally, when they parted, Medias shook hands with Michael and said, "Perhaps I can visit your village one day soon. Now I must excuse myself and go talk to the police."

"One thing," Segar said as they were leaving. "Critsaller had been here two days. Where was he staying?"

"We have only two hotels at present, and the Carpathian is the better of them. There are others closer to the ski slopes."

"Is that where he stayed? The Carpathian?"

"I believe so. He was there on his earlier visits." He called his secretary back in. "Hilda, was Critsaller at the Carpathian this time?"

"That's where he asked me to make the reservation. He preferred it because they have little refrigerators in the rooms, just like in the big cities."

Back in the car, Segar suggested they stop at the Carpathian. "He must have had a small suitcase or overnight bag with him. Would a thief have killed him for that?"

"Anything is possible," Michael replied.

But when they reached the Carpathian, a modest two-story hotel on the other side of town, a surprise awaited them. Otto Critsaller had not checked out. He was still registered in room 17. While Segar showed his credentials in an attempt to gain access to the room, Michael glanced around the small lobby. The place had no restaurant or bar, but a cooler with sliding-glass doors was available for guests to purchase beer and soft drinks for their room. A hotel bulletin board already displayed a sign proclaiming the advent of Vampire Land.

"All right," Segar said at last. "The manager will show us his room."

It was on the first floor near the back. He unlocked the door to let them in, then stood silently watching them. Segar went first to the closet door, opening it to reveal a dark blue garment bag. Inside were a change of clothes and a few toilet articles including an electric razor.

"He didn't check out," Michael said. "And he left his clothes here."

"Odd."

He left Segar to examine the garment bag while he toured the

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room. The bed was made and nothing seemed out of place. But then he remembered the little refrigerator under the television set. He opened it and found a plastic jug filled with a thick dark-red liquid. "What's this?"

Segar stared at it. "Blood?"

Michael opened the top and tried to pour a little out. "It's too thick for blood."

"Some sort of narcotic? Did he come here to buy it?"

"I don't know," Michael admitted. "We'd better leave it here for now."

When they were outside, Segar shook his head. "I don't know what we're getting ourselves into here. Do you have any suggestions?"

"Just one. Medias mentioned a local physician, Dr. Warsaw, who is opposed to the theme park. I wonder if his opposition might be so strong that he would kill off any would-be contractors."

The doctor was easy to locate, in his office at the town's clinic. He was a bald and bearded man with thick glasses. "I know nothing of this," he told them after Segar had explained the reason for their visit. "If I wanted to kill anyone it would be that damned Gypsy Saxon Medias, not some builder from Vienna."

"Do you have some prejudice against Gypsies?" Segar asked.

"No more so than anyone else. I would oppose Vampire Land no matter who proposed it." He had come around from behind his desk and now he removed his glasses to run a hand over his weary eyes. Michael thought it best to leave the questioning to Segar, and he took the opportunity to browse through some of Dr. Warsaw's medical texts. There was nothing on vampirism, of course. It wasn't even in the index.

Segar tried a different tactic. "Is there anyone in the town who might use violence to frustrate plans for Vampire Land?"

"Several people, some of whom are less charitable toward Gypsies than I am."

"Name one."

"Constello Alba. He's one of the workmen on the project, but he is quite outspoken against it."

There was nothing more to be learned from Dr. Warsaw, and they departed soon after. "What now?" Michael asked his friend.

"This Alba might be worth a visit. Let us drive out to the construction site."

Michael smiled. "You can't get away from police work, can you? Suppose you tell me the real reason you came here, and why you brought me along."

Segar headed the car back toward the construction site they'd observed on their way into town. "There have been threats," he

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answered reluctantly.

"What sort of threats?"

"My office has received three anonymous letters, apparently from the same person, warning of violence unless the Vampire Land project was halted. The tone of the letters seemed especially threatening toward Gypsies, and Saxon Medias was mentioned by name. I contacted the local authorities, but they treated the letters as some sort of hoax and wanted no government interference in their local affairs. The northern towns often treat the mountains as more than a geographic dividing line. They view it as a political one, too, and want nothing to do with Bucharest."

"But you came anyway."

"Because it is my job, Michael."

Segar turned the car into the bumpy dirt road past the Vampire Land sign. Perhaps a hundred workmen with heavy equipment were busy digging foundations for the theme-park structures. It took them awhile to locate Constello Alba. He was bare-chested and muscular, working in one of the holes while he directed the pouring of concrete. When he climbed up the ladder to meet them his expression was uncertain and a bit wary.

"You wanted me?"

Segar showed his credentials. "I understand you've been opposed to this project."

"Just opposed to Gypsies taking the jobs that belong to honest men."

"Are there Gypsies working here?"

For the first time Alba let his gaze shift to Michael, taking in the red tunic and the earring. "You're one of them, aren't you?"

"I am a Gypsy king from Gravita, across the mountains. Mr. Segar requested that I accompany him."

Alba spat on the ground before him. "I don't talk to Gypsies."

"Did you send the government some letters about this project?" Segar asked.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"If you have a complaint, you should take it to your town government. We will not allow any sort of violent protest here. One man has already been killed this morning under suspicious circumstances."

"Ask the Gypsy about that. Ask Saxon Medias."

"Do you know anything about it?"

"No."

Michael asked, "Is this just a theme park, or do you believe there are real vampires roaming the land?"

Alba's expression turned just a bit sly. "They tell me that body this morning had been drained of blood. Is that true?"

"We're still investigating," Segar replied.

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"Then it was either a vampire or some Gypsy trying to get publicity for his theme park."

"Can you believe Saxon Medias would kill someone just for publicity?"

He spat again. "I'd believe just about anything of a Gypsy."

"All right," Segar dismissed him with a wave. "Get back in your hole."

It was late afternoon by that time, and Michael knew they would be staying overnight. They took a room at the Carpathian and he telephoned home to tell Rosanna of their plans. Then Segar phoned Saxon Medias to tell him where they'd be.

It was just after midnight when the phone in their room rang. They'd just gone to bed and neither was asleep. Segar's bed was closest and he answered, speaking with growing alarm. "We'll be right there," he said, and hung up.

"What is it?" Michael asked.

"Get dressed! Someone just tried to kill Medias and his secretary. They threw firebombs at his house and her apartment."

The bombs were Molotov cocktails of the crudest sort, bottles of gasoline with flaming wicks in the neck. Medias had been lucky. The bomb missed his window and landed on the porch. The one at his secretary's ground-floor apartment had done more damage, smashing a window and setting fire to her living room carpet before it could be extinguished. They drove directly there and found Medias trying to comfort her.

"You're alive, Hilda," he said, holding her gently as she sobbed. "That's the important thing."

She was standing in the apartment doorway, unable to speak, wearing a robe over her nightgown. Firemen were pulling up the remains of the carpet and removing it, along with a coffee table that had been badly singed. The rest of the room had been spared, and even a clear glass vase crammed with too many sunflowers sat untouched atop the television set. "I was still up," she managed to tell them. "I was watching television when that flaming bottle came crashing through the window. My God, I thought I was going to die!"

"We saw a fellow named Constello Alba this afternoon," Segar told Medias. "He seemed to have a great hatred of Gypsies in general and your theme park in particular."

Medias nodded. "He's been nothing but trouble. I'll ask the contractor to fire him in the morning."

"Do you think he could have done this?"

"If he didn't, he knows who did."

"Were both attacks at the same time?" Michael asked.

"Mine was first," Medias said. "I heard the bottle hit the porch about twenty minutes before midnight. I never thought to call

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Hilda and warn her."

"They hit me about ten minutes later," she told them. "I called the fire department and tried to throw water on it. When the firemen arrived I phoned Mr. Medias."

Michael stepped carefully over the soggy floor to the broken window. Glass crunched underfoot and he saw green pieces from the gasoline bomb. He picked a clear curved piece out of his rubber-soled shoe. He leaned through the broken window and glanced left and right along the straight lines of the building. More glass glittered in the grass below. "Did you see anyone at all out here?" he asked Hilda.

"No one. I thought I heard a car drive away but I couldn't be sure."

Segar took Michael aside. "Do you think this could be connected to Critsaller's killing?"

"I've never heard of a vampire throwing a Molotov cocktail. This seems more Alba's style. Yet would he be foolish enough to try this right after we'd questioned him?"

There was no answer to be found that night. One person was dead and two others had been attacked, yet the crimes hardly seemed related. Back at their hotel Michael went to sleep puzzling over it and remembering something else, something he'd read while looking through one of Dr. Warsaw's medical books.

In the morning Segar decided they should head back. "I can't help feeling that our presence yesterday somehow triggered those firebombs last night. I'm sorry I brought you into this, Michael. We seem to have stirred up more prejudice against Gypsies without really accomplishing anything else."

"We had nothing to do with anything that happened," Michael tried to assure him. "After breakfast we'll go back to Saxon's office and I'll try to explain it all."

"You know who killed Critsaller? And who firebombed Medias and his secretary?"

Michael nodded while he finished dressing. "It came to me when I woke up this morning, clear as day."

"Is this a matter for the local militia?"

"I'll let you be the judge of that."

"Certainly a vampire—"

"There was no vampire."

"—or someone pretending to be one—"

"Wait until we talk to Saxon Medias."

He was at his office when they arrived, nervously smoking one of his Russian cigarettes. "I've been up all night," he told them. "I took Hilda to my house and had her sleep in my bed. I planned to sleep on the sofa, but I stayed up instead, going over every letter and

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threat we received since our first announcement of Vampire Land."

"Did you find many leads?" Segar asked.

"Too many." He patted the pile of papers on his desk. "But once construction is complete and tourists begin arriving, the townsfolk will realize this is a boon and not a blunder. Even the news of this vampire killing could help us."

"Michael says there is no vampire," Segar told him.

The bald Gypsy frowned. "No vampire? Not a supernatural one, perhaps, but anyone who sucks the blood from a body could be considered a vampire."

Michael glanced around. "I'll tell you exactly what happened. Perhaps you'd want Hilda to join us and take notes."

"Certainly." He called her in from the next room and she joined them with her pad.

"You see," Michael began, "there was one fact none of you knew about Otto Critsaller. He was a hemophiliac."

"What?" Saxon Medias asked.

"A bleeder. Someone who suffers from a rare blood disease that prevents the blood from coagulating. It leads to excessive bleeding even from minor injuries, and can be fatal."

"How do you know that Critsaller suffered from this?"

Michael held up a finger. "You told me he claimed to be an illegitimate descendant of Queen Victoria's son Leopold. In glancing through one of Dr. Warsaw's medical texts I learned a great deal about hemophilia. Leopold was one of many royal personages in Europe afflicted with the disease. It's hereditary. Leopold's sons would have been free of it, but any daughters would have become carriers, passing it on to their own sons in fifty percent of the cases. It came down like that through perhaps three generations before Critsaller's mother would have passed it on to him."

"You said it happens only half the time," Segar pointed out.

"But it happened to Critsaller. We know because there was a cooler in his car with melted ice inside. He brought something with him that had to be kept cold. That's why he needed a hotel with a refrigerator in the room. On a trip like this, to a small Romanian town without modern medical facilities, he could take no chances. He brought along a blood concentrate called cryoprecipitate, prepared from the blood of a single donor of his blood type. It could be mixed with distilled water and given to him in a transfusion if necessary. Once I thought about it, I knew that had to be the answer. If someone had pumped or sucked the blood out of him, it would have been completely gone. The autopsy report told us some blood remained in the body, because the bleeding would have ceased once he died."

"Did Dr. Warsaw's book tell you who murdered him, too?"

"I didn't need that." Michael turned to Saxon Medias's secretary.

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"Hilda, suppose you tell us why you threw that vase at Otto Critsaller and killed him with it."

"It's all right," Segar announced, bending over the fallen woman. "She's only fainted."

Medias brought her a glass of water and soon she was sitting up, shaking her head. "This is unreal," she told Michael. "How could you have known?"

"There were too many sunflowers in your remaining vase. When I stepped on a piece of clear glass I assumed it was from your window, but then I noticed it was curved. You had two clear glass vases, and you threw one at Critsaller. It cut his neck and he bled to death on your living room carpet while you watched, helpless to do anything."

"He kept telling me to get the blood from the refrigerator. It didn't make sense."

"You look strong and he was a small man. After he died you managed to carry or drag him out to his car and drove it off the road where it was found later. Then you walked back home before it was fully daylight. But there was no way you could clean all that blood from your carpet. So you devised a plan with the Molotov cocktails. You threw one at your employer's porch to make it seem like a protest against the theme park. Then you drove quickly home and smashed your window from inside the house. The glass all went outside, but you didn't worry because the glass from the vase was still on the carpet inside. You didn't think about its being curved. And it was a bad idea to stuff all those sunflowers in one vase before you smashed the bottle of gasoline and set fire to your carpet."

Hilda shook her head. "I think I was in shock all day. He'd stopped by my apartment before, on his other trips, and behaved like a gentleman. This time was different. When I told him I wouldn't sleep with him he came at me. I picked up the vase to protect myself and he ran right into it. When I saw all the blood I just went to pieces. Somehow I had to get rid of the body and protect myself."

"You should have told me," Medias said. "I could have helped you. Perhaps I still can."

"All this must be reported to the local police," Segar told them.

"Of course."

He studied them for a moment and then said, "I leave that to you. Michael and I must be starting back."

Medias walked them to the car. "You have been very helpful in this matter. Come back when Vampire Land is open and I can give you free passes."

"We will do that," Segar promised, and Michael had the feeling he meant it. ●

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Excuse Me, I Have Murdered My Wife

by Peter Turnbull

MONDAY 10:20 HRS.–10:50 HRS.

The weather first. Note the weather. It was always important. Sometimes it was more important than at other times, but it was always important. Then the time. That was another thing. That, too, was always important and, similarly, it was sometimes more important than at other times. But it was always of some degree of importance.

The weather was dry, blustery, perhaps, but dry. And warm for early March. Too warm, really, buds on the branches of the few trees and shrubs, and this was an ex-posed location. They shouldn't be out this early, especially here in Scotland. Just needs a late frost, but then again, then again, he thought, this is just another example of the issue of global warming that scientists are always banging on about these days. But it was noticeable how warm it was for March in Scotland. He was twenty-six years of age and had grown up in Glasgow, and March for him was still the time of snow and frost and slush, sometimes slush if the winter went early.

It was 10:20 A.M. Dry, late morning, and warm.

Phil Hamilton felt that that was all he could do. There was the road, the Glasgow to Kilmarnock Road driving masterfully across Fenwick Moor. There was the motorist sitting in his car, looking pale and agitated. Hamilton thought the man's age to be about

In reviewing Peter Turnbull's most recent novel *Perils and Dangers* (Severn), *Publishers Weekly* said: "... it's his characterizations ... that make this novel memorable. Privy to their [the characters'] thoughts and conversations, as well as details of their personal lives, we get to know and embrace them as part of our literary family whom we eagerly wait to hear from again." And that is the appeal of stories such as this P Division procedural too.

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sixty, and he thought the man should be more used to death than he seemed, but he was as shaken as a student nurse at her first postmortem, or as shaken as a police cadet pulling his first mangled corpse from a motor accident. Perhaps, he thought, perhaps the man was unusually sensitive, perhaps he had had a sheltered life, perhaps he was recently bereaved and the corpse had been too close to home for him, perhaps, perhaps, perhaps. . . . There was nothing for it: The man had to remain in his car, in the lay-by. Beside the lay-by was a mound of soil covered in marram grass, which at that time was being tugged by the occasional gust of wind. The ground dipped behind the mound and then rose again and became Fenwick Moor, which reached roughly and unevenly to the skyline some half-mile distant, where it gave way to a low grey sky. Between the mound of soil beside the lay-by and the line of rotten wooden posts and rusted wire which marked the boundary of Fenwick Moor—the border between the moor proper and the land managed by the Highways Department of the Regional Council—in the dip of the land, near the road, yet fully hidden from passing view, was the woman.

The man sitting in the car had, he claimed, stopped at the lay-by to rest and eat a late breakfast, had left the car to stretch his legs, and had stumbled across the woman. Literally.

Hamilton had been the first cop on the scene and had viewed her. She was lying facedown, head to one side, sparsely clad in an evening dress and shoes. Sufficient for sitting in a restaurant but not for the moor, even in this mild March. How old was she? Hamilton thought her to be in her forties. She was fair-haired, slender. Back to her clothing: It was of good quality, sensible clothing, mid-range, not designer label but not off a stall in the covered market, either. She wore an engagement ring and a wedding ring. And she was dead: stiff with rigor.

Hamilton had radioed back to P Division and had reported a possible code four-one. He requested C.I.D. attendance and a police surgeon. He had secured the locus and ensured that the person who found the body remained at the scene, and he thought then that there was little else that he could do. Except to note the time and the weather.

Traffic went by. The drivers and any passengers turned their gaze towards Hamilton, the cop, the police car with its blue lights silently lapping, the car parked in front of the police vehicle in which the lone occupant would have appeared agitated. Something clearly had happened. Something was afoot. Hamilton remained composed, as dictated by training and the good example of more experienced officers. He was nonetheless relieved to see Richard King's car approach from the north, from the direction of the City of Glasgow. He indicated left to enter the lay-by and as he

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slowed Hamilton raised a hand in greeting and King flashed his headlights by means of reply.

Moments later, after King had viewed the corpse, he said, "What's the story so far as you know it?"

"Gentleman here, sir." Hamilton nodded to the man in the car. "He travels in toys."

"He what . . . ?" King looked at the car, a red Ford Granada. "It looks real enough to me."

Hamilton laughed until he realised that King was serious. "No, sir. I mean he's a travelling salesman employed by a wholesaler of children's toys. He drove down from Aberdeen, he was on the road at seven, he told me, felt like a break at about ten this morning, a few minutes ago—had a snack and got out of the car to stretch his legs and . . ."

"The rest is history."

"Yes, sir. He's got quite a few calls to make and he's anxious to get on the road, as he puts it, but he's looking green round the gills so I don't think it would do him any harm to wait awhile before driving, apart from the necessity of him having to wait. He stumbled across the body and phoned the three nines on his mobile. I attended and phoned for C.I.D. assistance."

"And here I am." King looked about him. "Nothing else appears connected to this. . . . No other bodies in evidence that I can see, though we'll have to do a thorough search of the area. Do you think it's suspicious?"

"Yes, sir. Yes, I do."

"Why?"

"Well, she's not dressed for the moor, there's no obvious indication of suicide. There's the feeling that she's been murdered and dumped from a car."

"I'd go along with that. How long ago, do you think?"

"Hard to say; the limbs have stiffened, legs are raised, feet off the ground, but no decomposition that I can detect. Two days?"

"Two or three." King nodded. "I'd go along with that, too. We'll have to get the pathologist out here. You've requested a police surgeon to certify death?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'll radio from my car for a pathologist on the grounds that death appears suspicious. Is that the term right enough, salesmen say they 'travel' in whatever they sell?"

"Yes, sir. It is. My father-in-law travels in ladies' underwear."

TUESDAY 07:30 HRS.–17:30 HRS.

Fabian Donoghue reversed his Rover out of the drive of his family home in Craiglockhart in suburban Edinburgh. He was a Glaswe-

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gian by birth and by inclination, but his wife was of the capital and would not live in Glasgow. It was, he thought, an example of the gulf that exists between the two cities, just forty-five miles apart by road or rail, but a world apart in terms of culture. It had often been noted by Donoghue, and remarked upon by others, that a gangster with enemies without number in the Glasgow underworld who suddenly has to flee for his life, where does he flee to? Australia? A small town in Canada or South Africa? No, no, he goes to Edinburgh. And is quite safe.

Donoghue drove onto the M8 and settled down to a steady 60 m.p.h in the inside lane, turned on Radio Four for company, and enjoyed the drive, as he usually did. On balance, he would prefer to live in Glasgow, but he had to concede that he rather enjoyed the separation between work and home—living in one city and working in the other—that the by no means impossible drive of sixty minutes door-to-door each way made possible. In Glasgow, he left the M8 at St. George's, and moments later he turned into the car park at the rear of the P Division Police Station. He entered the building by the rear "staff only" entrance, signed in, and said a warm but authoritative "Good morning" to the constable on duty at the uniform bar, who replied with a crisp, "Good morning, Inspector." He checked his pigeonhole, just a few circulars, which he left there, intending to read them after lunch. He climbed the stairs to the C.I.D. corridor and in his office he hung his coat and hat on the hat stand and sat at his desk and lit his first pipe of the day. It was, by then, 08:31.

There was a tap on his door. He waited for a second or two and then, with an air of imperiousness which many found annoying, he said, "Come."

Richard King entered his office. He held a file in his hand.

Donoghue smiled and indicated a vacant chair in front of his desk.

King slid into the chair. "The body that was discovered yesterday morning, sir."

"Ah." Donoghue placed his pipe in the glass ashtray on his desk. The ashtray was of such generous proportions that once a junior constable had quipped that all Donoghue now needed was some water and a goldfish or two—and was, in return, in receipt of a crushing glare from said inspector. "Developments?"

"Either that or the thickening of a plot, sir."

"Tell me."

"Well, it links in with the robbery of the Glasgow and Dumbarton Building Society, the incident on Friday last."

"The abduction?"

"That's the one."

"Remind me of the nuts and bolts, please."

"Well, the lady was abducted from her home. She was the man-

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ager of the branch which was robbed. The thieves overpowered her and her husband, left him trussed up and gagged, and took her away with them. We presume that they drove her to the building society to open it up and neutralise the alarm, and they then relieved the building society of approximately one hundred thousand pounds in used, untraceable notes."

"And I presume that the lady found by the chap who travels in toys has been identified as the branch manager of the building society in question?"

"She has, sir. A Mrs. McLean by name. Fifty-three years of age."

"Must have been looking forward to retirement. Has her husband been notified?"

"Not yet, sir. The ID has only just been confirmed."

"How?"

"We found her handbag near to where her body was found, with her name and address inside; the clothing matches the clothing she was known to be wearing when she was abducted, a black evening dress with silver shoes, and the watch and jewellery matches the description of same which was provided by her husband."

"I see."

"I'd be disinclined to ask Mr. McLean to view the corpse, sir. I'd ask that any confirmation of her ID be done by removing the lower jaw and matching her lower teeth with her dental records. The reason for that is, there's been a degree of postmortem damage to the face."

"Damage?"

"Dr. Reynolds thinks it to be predator damage, foxes most likely, but it could have been rats, apparently."

"Very good, yes, we'll go for a dental-record confirmation. Did Dr. Reynolds find the cause of death?"

"Massive blow to the back of the head, sir. Cracked her skull wide open. Killed her outright."

"Imagine it would. Who's the interested police officer, for the robbery, I mean?"

"D.C. Montgomerie, sir."

"And you, for your sins, are the interested C.I.D. officer for the murder."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, it's one and the same case now. How far has Montgomerie got with his inquiries?"

"Not far at all, sir, but in fairness, he has precious little to go on. There were no witnesses; Mr. McLean could only talk about three masked men. The closed-circuit television cameras in the building society only operate during office hours, it's the only time they thought they would be robbed."

"They thought."

"Indeed. Now they're on twenty-four hours."

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Donoghue asked to see the file. King handed it to him. He read it and noted that the couple were attacked at 11:30 P.M. on the Friday last. He glanced up at King. "The building society is on Gordon Street. Centre of the town?"

"Yes, sir."

"So, allowing for time to overpower Mr. McLean and tie him up . . ."

"Chain him up."

"Sorry?"

"They used lengths of lightweight chain and small padlocks."

"Very well, allowing for the time to do that, and allowing half an hour for the journey from the sleepy, leafy suburbs of Bearsden where the McLeans live to the city centre, that would put them in the city centre just after midnight."

"Yes, sir."

"There's still plenty of folk around the city centre at that time, especially on a Friday. The building society may well have switched its security cameras off, but they leave their lights on; pedestrians can look into the premises, for example, as can patrolling police officers."

"Yes, sir."

"A woman in an evening dress is bundled into a well-lit branch of a building society by three masked men at about midnight in the centre of the city. And nobody saw anything? Come on."

"Since you put it like that, sir."

"Montgomerie didn't think there was anything suspicious about this story? He hasn't recorded it, if he did. This doesn't make sense, it's a complete cock-and-bull story."

"Yes, sir."

"I think you and I had better go and have a wee chat with Mr. McLean."

Two things alerted Donoghue's suspicion. The first was the squeaky-clean home. Squeaky, squeaky, squeaky, everything-in-its-place perfection. The second was the total lack of emotion on the part of Harold McLean.

Those two things did not in Donoghue's eyes marry at all well together. A squeaky-clean, neat home is a home where there is an overreaction to anything that is out of place or which upsets the routine—a smear of dust, the clock on the wall allowed to be a minute too fast or too slow—and it was in such a home that Donoghue had first encountered such an overreaction to imperfection; the husband had violently assaulted his wife because the magazines on the coffee table had not been placed in alphabetical order. Yet here in this house, amid the shiny, impeccable neatness, Harold McLean looked at the handbag, and the watch, and the bracelet and said, "Yes, these are hers."

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As if it was all ever so normal. Alarm bells rang in Donoghue's mind. "Mr. McLean," he said, softly.

"Yes?" McLean was a small man. Even allowing for the fact that Donoghue and King were cops and taller than most, McLean was a small man. Smaller than average, and in the west of Scotland that's not just small; it's small. He stood, all in proportion, no short spine or small legs; everything about him was in proportion, just as big or as small as it should be. He was just short. Less than five feet tall. They may have made an odd couple, Donoghue mused. The file had given Mrs. McLean's height at five foot eleven inches. But it was not the height or lack of same which puzzled Donoghue. It was the gleam in the man's eyes.

"You don't seem at all surprised that your wife has been murdered."

"Should I be?"

"There's no right or wrong about it."

"There you are, then."

"But some distress, some emotion . . ."

"Look, I'm not surprised that my wife is dead. After the way she was taken from the house that night, and after this amount of time, I would be surprised if she were alive. . . . If she returned alive and well, then, then you would see some emotion."

Donoghue was not convinced. "Did you have a good relationship with your wife?"

"It worked. We've been married for a fair few years, things settle down. The spark goes. We had our ups and downs like any couple. I dare say we were as happy as anybody we knew."

"Children?"

"One of each. Both up and away. Gone south, both in England."

"I see. Could you take us through the events of last Friday?"

"Again? I told the other officer . . ."

"Again. For my edification. Please."

"Well . . . shall we sit down?"

"If you wish, Mr. McLean."

When the three men were seated in comfortable chairs in the well-appointed living room, Mr. McLean said, "It was all very sudden. . . . We had been to a social function."

"Where?"

"What?"

King looked at Donoghue.

"Where was the social function?"

"Is that important?"

Then King saw it. McLean was searching for an answer and alarm bells began to jangle in his mind also.

"Well..." McLean struggled. "Perhaps it was not a social function."

"What then?"

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"If you must know . . ."

"We must."

"A pub. We spent the evening in a pub."

"Hardly a social function."

"It sounds better than saying you went to a pub for the evening. . . . I mean, for people of our station."

"Your station? So just what is your station, Mr. McLean?"

"My wife is the manager of a branch of a building society and that is a position which is not without its responsibilities."

"I'm sure it isn't."

"So we have an image to sustain."

"And that's important to you?"

"Well, yes."

"Appearances to be kept up? Which costs money."

"Yes. Yes it does."

"And yourself? What is your station in life?"

"Is that relevant?"

"Mr. McLean." Donoghue relaxed in his chair, his manner calm and self-assured. "The nature of an inquiry such as this is that everything is relevant until we know it's not. So again, what is your station in life?"

"It's not." McLean displayed the only flash of honesty that Donoghue thought he would see in the man. McLean displayed his shame on his sleeve.

"Meaning?"

"It's no secret. I lost my job. I was made redundant. I gave twenty years' service to Bonniface Limited and they showed me the door. 'We're downsizing, Harold,' they said, 'no room anymore, not for you, you and one or two others, as well. No redundancy, no package, we're not big enough, if you wanted that you should have given your years to a larger company, been a smaller fish in a big pond. Anyway, just clear your desk and leave. And don't look back.'"

"That would make anybody angry."

"It made me angry. But that was a year ago. I made my adjustments, came to terms with it. Plenty of work to do in the garden."

"Where is Bonniface Limited?"

"Queenslie Industrial Estate."

"So their downsizing worked. I mean, they're still in business."

"Aye . . ." Suddenly McLean wasn't giving anything away. King's interest grew.

"So . . . you were saying?"

"I was?"

"About Friday . . ."

"Oh, aye. I came back—we came back—we'd just opened the door and they steamed in behind us. You've seen our front garden, the shrubs, the poor street lighting. You could hide two companies of

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infantry out there. So I opened the door, Gillian was behind me, suddenly I was pushed forwards, I went down, Gillian was on top of me on the floor of the hallway and these guys were in our house. Three, I think, perhaps four, army combat gear, masks, they knew what they were doing. . . . Before I knew what was happening my wrists and ankles were shackled together with chain, light chain and small padlocks, sufficient to restrain me, and a gag was in my mouth."

"A gag?"

"Cloth, tied round my head."

"I see."

"Gillian was bundled out of the door and I spent the night in the hallway."

"You didn't raise the alarm?"

"How could I?"

"Did you hear anyone?"

"Postman, milkman, newspaper boy, saw them through the frosted glass."

"You couldn't have shouted?"

"Not with a gag in my mouth."

"Of course, yes."

"The police forced the door at about nine A.M. on the Saturday and they told me Gillian's branch of the society had been robbed, didn't know how much. . . . Gillian had not turned up for work and so they called here and found me."

"So they were looking for three guys?"

"Or four. It was all very confusing."

"Did they address each other by name?"

"No. All done in silence."

"I see. There's one thing that puzzles me, Mr. McLean."

"Oh?"

"Your wife wearing an evening dress to the pub. Odd item of clothing for a lady to wear to a pub, I mean, even allowing for your station in life."

"Yes."

A pause.

"She liked to dress up?"

"Yes, she did."

"Which pub did you go to?"

"I don't know its name. Gillian took me there, she wanted to go out, taxi there, taxi back, a wine bar really, in the town, hence the evening gown. Still a little overdressing, but not as overdressing as if we had gone to the Bear and Billet in the village here."

"So, no witnesses that can confirm you and your wife were having a drink on Friday evening?"

"Well, there's plenty . . . staff on the bar, other customers . . . but I don't know their names."

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"And if you don't know which bar you were in, we can't question the staff, can we?"

McLean smiled. "No," he said. "You can't."

Outside, walking back to their car, Donoghue asked King what he thought of Mr. McLean.

"I think he's covering something up, sir."

"I think so, too. I'm driving us both back to Glasgow. I'll drop you off at the police station. Pick up your car and drive out to Bonniface Limited, talk to whoever and get some background on McLean. I'm going to the building society and then to the hospital."

"The hospital?"

"Specifically, the G.R.I. I want to pick Dr. Reynolds's brains about this matter. We'll rendezvous back at the station."

"He was let go." Mrs. Ngam replied sniffily. She was a woman of Asian extraction, but very middle-class, British by her manner and voice. King also thought that she had a chip on her shoulder, she had a point to prove about something. She was aggressively dressed in a scarlet two-piece and stainless-steel spectacles. Her hair was black, glossy and shoulder-length. She seemed to resent King's presence in her busy, busy day, finding him an irritant.

"Let go? He said you were downsizing. He said you let him go after twenty years' faithful service."

"Really, is that what he said?" Under her nameplate it read Personnel Officer. "Well, it's strange how things look different from a different perspective."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that I wouldn't say his contribution to the company amounted to twenty years' faithful service. I'd say we tolerated his inefficiency for twenty years, according to his record. In essence, if there was an administrative foul-up somewhere, Harold McLean, or 'wee Harry' as he was known, was at the bottom of it. It would inevitably be down to him, whatever 'it' was."

"That right?"

"That's right. The odd thing was that I couldn't understand how he always looked so pleased with himself all the time. It's my experience that people who are not good at their jobs tend to go about looking sheepish and self-conscious, but Mr. McLean carried himself as though he was the hub of the company."

"What did he do?"

"Very little in one sense, quite a lot in another."

"What was he supposed to do?"

"He was an audit clerk. He seemed to resent the fact that his wife had a job with more status. Building Society branch manager, I think, but he only ever made passing reference to that—when he did refer to it, he did so with resentment. Therein, perhaps, was

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the problem. As an audit clerk he had access to cash, he resented his wife earning more than he did, and he was essentially a dishonest man. . . ."

"Embezzlement?"

"In a word, yes."

"How much?"

"Over the years he took about fifty thousand pounds."

"Enough."

"Yes. We wanted to avoid a scandal and so we offered him a deal. He would continue to work for us for half pay, we'd keep the other half until we had recovered the fifty thousand, and then he would tender his resignation."

"Fair enough."

"Either that or we'd call in the police, you chaps. It was his decision. He chose to continue working for half pay and no longer looked like he thought he was the hub of the company. It was a good deal for him because not only did it mean he'd avoid criminal proceedings, but the offer took no account of the inflationary process; the fifty thousand we recovered from him if he kept his part of the deal had much less spending power than the fifty thousand he'd stolen."

"So he was paying back less than he had stolen?"

"Yes. But it would still mean he had to work for half pay for about five years before he'd paid off his debt. He's a small man with a huge ego, but he found a solution because he stuck it for about eighteen months, then just yesterday afternoon he walked into this office and stood just about where you are sitting and put a holdall containing forty-three thousand pounds on my desk, that being the amount of outstanding debt, and told me where to put my job. I won't repeat his exact words because I'm a lady. I can't say the management was sorry to let him go."

Richard King began to feel very unwell.

"She was a lady with problems at home." T. S. Gryffe, by his nameplate, leaned back in his chair and pyramided his fingers and struck Donoghue as being too old in his manner, too confident for his years, which seemed to Donoghue to be about twenty-five, probably less. "Never spoke a great deal, but this is a small branch, only ten staff, and it gets difficult to hide things from each other."

"Did she indicate what was bothering her?"

"I gather it was husband trouble. She didn't elaborate. She was a private person."

"Anything particularly untoward happen before she disappeared?"

T. S. Gryffe looked at the ceiling and then glanced at the large framed photograph of Loch Lomond on the wall beside him, then said, "She didn't want to go out."

"Out?"

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"Well, as near as I could gather, her husband had for many weeks been pestering her to go out for a drink or a meal, he wanted her to get kitted up in her finery and go out for the evening. I had the impression that things at home were so fraught that she'd rather spend the evening with Vlad the Impaler or Attila the Hun than go out with her dearest wedded husband, but he had worn her down by relentless persuasion, or so it seemed. I heard her say that she'd go out with him for the sake of peace, just to make him shut up, but she'd only do it once. It would not be the start of a pattern."

"Interesting. And that was . . . ?"

"The day of the robbery. Last Friday. We came to work on the Saturday, as normal, banks don't work on Saturdays but the poor building society staff have to turn in. We have a one-and-a-half-day weekend, and that's our lot. We found the alarm had been switched off and the safe opened and we had been relieved of about one hundred thousand pounds. We called the police immediately and then had a muster. All were accounted for except Mrs. McLean, our manager. The police went to her house and I understand they found him tied up and her nowhere to be found. Though I gather she may now have been found . . . ? My mum phoned me, she'd caught the lunchtime news."

"She may have been found. What can you tell me about the break-in?"

"It wasn't."

"Sorry?"

"It wasn't a break-in. It was what is known as an inside job, or done by a felon who had obtained inside knowledge. The entry wasn't forced. I was first to arrive on the Saturday morning. At first, nothing seemed out of place. I unlocked the door and went to the alarm—the procedure is that I have thirty seconds to get to the alarm before it goes off once I've opened the door—but on Saturday I found it had not been set. But I witnessed Mrs. McLean setting the alarm at close of business on Friday."

"So between Friday at about five P.M. and Saturday at eight-thirty A.M. someone had unlocked the door, neutralised the alarm and opened the safe, and stolen about one hundred thousand pounds?"

"Yes. The door had been locked again, but the alarm had not been reset. I presume the raiders had forced Mrs. McLean to unlock the door and forced her to neutralise the alarm and then open the safe. They nicked the dosh and locked up behind them, but they didn't reset the alarm. No need."

"How many staff know the alarm-setting procedure?"

"Three. Mrs. McLean, myself as deputy manager, and Tim Snoddy, who is also a deputy here. We have two deputy managers. Any two have got to set the alarm together. One to do it, the other to witness it being done. That procedure is carved in stone."

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"Any security scares?"

"Not before Saturday."

"Is the safe alarmed?"

"No. Simple key. Our security is dependent on two things: one is the wake-the-dead alarm which triggers thirty seconds after the door is unlocked unless it's neutralised within those thirty seconds, and the second is the glass door, huge glass window, and the lights left on. Anybody in the building is clearly visible from the street. . . ." He paused. "Oh . . . security scare. . . ."

"Yes, Mr. Gryffe?"

"Mrs. McLean herself."

"Tell me."

"Some months ago. She and her husband were seen leaving the building at about nine P.M. one evening. Apparently she'd left an item, a personal item which she needed, on her desk and had called back to collect it. A constable saw her leaving and stopped her and her husband and took their names and reported it to the head office just for form's sake. She was reprimanded and it went on her service record. She shouldn't have entered the building alone because it compromised the security procedures of the building—she was not to set the alarm without a witness to the fact, carved in stone, remember—but by far the most serious matter was that she took her husband in with her and he wasn't a staff member."

"If her husband was with her, he'd have seen the procedure for switching off the alarm. Is that what you're telling me?"

"Yes . . . I'm afraid it is. It's a simple matter of pressing four numbered buttons in the correct sequence. He'd have to remember the sequence."

"But if he could do that, all he'd need was . . ."

"The keys to the door and the safe, which can't be seen from the street."

"Kept by?"

"Myself, Snoddy, and Mrs. McLean herself, of course."

"Of course."

The man was tall, slender, silver-haired. He was a forensic pathologist. He sat in a chair in his cramped office in the bowels of the G.R.I. adjacent to the postmortem operating theatre. Fabian Donoghue, having explained the reason for his visit, listened attentively.

"There are two points that cause me some suspicion, Inspector. The first is that a gag of the type you describe doesn't prevent you from making a sound, especially, as in this case, if the wearer is a male and projects his voice from his stomach rather than from the roof of the mouth as a woman does. What it does do is stop the wearer speaking; can't pronounce words but you can still make quite a din if you put your mind to it."

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"He said that he was in the hallway of his house, saw the postman, the milkman, and the newspaper delivery boy through the frosted glass of his door but couldn't draw their attention because of the gag."

"Nonsense. I could put a cloth in my mouth and still project my voice well down the corridor even with the door here closed. The other thing that concerns me is that you did not mention the man soiling his clothing."

"There was no mention of it in the report."

"Would that be mentioned, if he had soiled himself?"

"Condition of the victim? Yes, that would merit a definite mention. I could check with the interested C.I.D. officer and also with the constables who found him."

"I'd advise it. You see, if he had been set upon immediately upon his return home after an evening in a wine bar and tied up and not found until nine A.M. the next morning, then in my capacity as a medical man, I can assure you that he would not in those hours have been able to prevent discharge from his bladder and possibly his bowels as well. Upon being found, he would have been badly soiled by his own body waste, if his story was true."

"Could he tie himself up?"

"Easily, especially if he used lightweight chain and small padlocks. Easiest thing in the world. I'm sorry, Inspector, but his story just doesn't add up and deliver."

Donoghue and King returned to the house of McLean. The house was empty, no car in the drive, front door left ajar. Inside was evidence of a hastily packed suitcase.

"I thought he'd do this."

"You don't seem too worried, sir."

"I'm not. Especially . . ." Donoghue took a step forward and reached for a U.K. passport which stood on the mantlepiece, "especially as in his haste he forgot the thing he really needed. Now he won't be able to leave these shores. It's quite handy at times, us being an island race. We can find the number plate of his car easily enough, and we know what he looks like. He won't be able to stay submerged forever. It's a case of being able to run but not hide. So he's got the proceeds of the robbery less what he gave to his ex-employer. He'll go to ground until the money runs out and then, some months from now, he'll be in a dishevelled state and he'll walk into a police station somewhere between the north of Scotland and the south of England and say, "Excuse me, I have murdered my wife."

Outside, as they walked to where they'd parked their car, Donoghue saw a thrush fly past with a twig in its beak and he thought how warm it was for the time of year. ●

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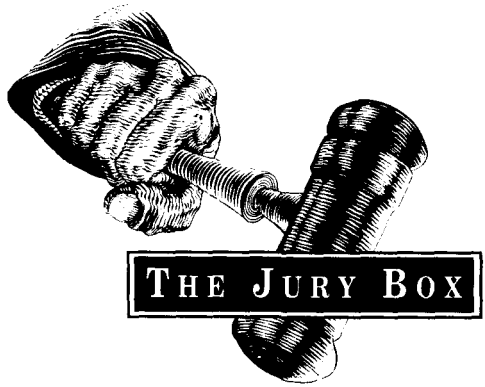

by Jon L. Breen

With so many new books to choose from, I only review those I expect to enjoy. But sometimes a book will exceed my hopes. I knew solid professionalism would mark the first collection by the two Eastern Kentucky University professors known to magazine readers as Hal Charles and (in the last few years of *Mike Shayne Mystery Magazine)* the final ghost of Brett Halliday. But the book is stronger, both in serious themes and pure entertainment, than I anticipated.

*** Hal Blythe and Charlie Sweet: *Bloody Ground: Stories of Mystery and Intrigue from Kentucky,* Jesse Stuart Foundation, $15. Of these 17 tales, two were first published in *EQMM.* Apart from the vivid Kentucky background, the range of topics and approaches is wide indeed, from historical to contemporary, omniscient third-person to first-person dialect, pure detection to mainstream tales like the haunting leadoff "Who's Jody?" Two unconventional private-eye yarns feature former basketball star A.E. Holliday, while "academic gypsy" Kirk Heller appears in two stories. Recurring subjects include sports (but not, apart from passing references, horse racing), teaching, and fundamentalist religion, including two stories involving snake-handling churches. The closest comparison among mystery regionalists may be to Iowa's Ed Gorman.

*** Max Allan Collins: *Chicago Confidential,* New American Library, $22.95. In 1950, private eye Nate Heller returns to Chicago for a case involving Senator Estes Kafauver's organized crime hearings. Among the other guest celebrities (well-captured as always) are Frank Sinatra, Jayne Mansfield, Senator Joseph McCarthy, and a variety of notorious mobsters. Collins is incomparable at confronting the tough, wisecracking private eye of mid-century myth with real-life crime problems.

*** Steven Saylor: *A Mist of*

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Prophecies, St. Martin's Minotaur, $23.95. In 48 B.C., Rome is plagued by inflation and hardships precipitated by the Civil War between forces of Caesar and Pompey. An ageing Gordianus the Finder looks into the murder of epileptic prophetess Cassandra, whose funeral is attended by the wives of powerful Romans. The illness of the sleuth's wife Bethesda, along with the nature of his relationship to the victim, gives this one a darker tone than other novels in this fine series.

*** Bill Pronzini: *More Oddments,* Five Star, $24.95. Though at least half these fourteen stories (originally published between 1967 and 2001) have appeared in earlier Pronzini collections, they will be new to many readers: for example, the ingenious historical "Fergus O'Hara, Detective" appeared in a volume of his westerns. Among the others are one Nameless story, two collaborations (an impossible crime tale with Michael Kurland and the short-story version of the science-fiction satire "Prose Bowl" with Barry Malzberg), and several evocative pure crime stories. Three first appeared in *EQMM,* five in *AHMM.*

*** Edward D. Hoch: *The Night People and Other Stories,* Five Star, $24.95. Some of these twenty non-series stories published between 1957 and 1979 are in Hoch's familiar pure detection mode, but others have the noirishness of Cornell Woolrich and the moral complexity of Graham Greene. While Hoch has undoubtedly grown as a writer in his near-fifty-year career, he was a master of story structure from the very beginning. Of special interest is "Festival in Black," previously published only in Great Britain in 1960, with a film festival background and a plot that foreshadows both the Rand and Nick Velvet series. Four first appeared in *EQMM,* another nine in *AHMM,* the rest in a variety of now-defunct digests.

*** S.J. Rozan: *Winter and Night,* St. Martin's Minotaur, $24.95. The latest about New York private eyes Bill Smith and Lydia Chin concerns the search for Smith's runaway 15-year-old nephew and the bizarre traditions and deeply buried secrets of a high-school-football-crazed New Jersey town. Gripping from beginning to end, the novel includes one of the most unusual and elaborate campaigns of revenge in detective-fiction annals. Among its other virtues, this series illustrates the civilizing effect that women have on men.

** Sam McCarver: *The Case of the Ripper's Revenge,* Signet, $5.99. The fourth in an enjoyable historical series finds paranormal debunker John Darnell investigating murders in 1917 London that seem to replicate those of Jack the Ripper. Among the elements of the outré plot is a Pygmalion-in-reverse directorial project of George Bernard Shaw. There are some anachronisms in the language—were the terms *psychopath* and *copy-*

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cat (related to crime) in common usage at that time?

** Emily Toll: *Murder Will Travel,* Berkley, $6.50. Given the popularity of travelogue mysteries with readers (not to mention writers and their tax advisors), travel-agent-cum-tour-guide Lynne Montgomery is a natural to front a cozy series. The background (the wine country of Sonoma County, California) and the large cast of characters are so nicely developed and the story so entertainingly told, it's a pity the ending, with absolutely no detection by anyone, is such a letdown. Toll is a pseudonym of Taffy Cannon.

** Frank Howel Evans: *"Old Pawray": The London Adventures of Monsieur Jules Poiret,* The Battered Silicon Dispatch Box, P.O. Box 122, Sauk City, WI, 53582, $22. The formidable British fan-critic Robert Adey introduces this gathering of five tales from 1909, about a retired French cop who may have inspired Christie's Hercule Poirot. Though less distinguished than those of contemporaries Freeman, Futrelle, Chesterton, and Orczy, the stories are readable and amusing beyond their historical interest. The original magazine illustrations and an Evans bibliography add to the slim volume's value.

All readers interested in the history of mystery and detective fiction should be grateful to George Vanderburgh, Canadian publisher of The Battered Silicon Dispatch Box. I especially recommend volume 11 of the dozen-volume R. Austin Freeman Omnibus Edition, containing Oliver Mayo's 1980 Freeman biography, *The Anthropologist at Large,* more than 200 double-column pages of scholarly articles (many by *EQMM* contributor John H. Dirckx), and a selection of pastiches, three by Mayo and a fourth by earlier biographer Norman Donaldson. In short, an invaluable one-volume reference on the creator of Dr. Thorndyke, one of the most important of detective fiction pioneers. A bargain at $60, it was first published in 2000 but is still available, as are the other volumes at various prices. Somewhat more esoteric is David Hammer's unpretentious *The Game is Underfoot: The Memoir of a Sherlockian Publisher* ($15), recommended to more-than-casual Sherlock Holmes devotees for the personal glimpses of scholars and pastiche-writers like Michael Harrison, Michael and Mollie Hardwick, and (especially eye-opening) encyclopedist/publisher Jack Tracy.

Drood Review editor Jim Huang's Crum Creek Press (484 E. Carmel Dr. #378, Carmel, IN 46032) has published a companion volume to his award-winning *100 Favorite Mysteries of the Century.* Book dealers, academics, and fans recommend neglected favorites in *They Died in Vain: Overlooked, Underappreciated and Forgotten Mystery Novels* ($13). Entertaining reading and a nice book-hunting list; title notwithstanding, some authors it celebrates *are* still alive.

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Art by June Levine

THE BLIND WOMAN

by Janice Law

At the end of Seth's cornfield the forest began, thick and dark and mysterious with the occasional whisper of moccasined feet. Once in a long while, if the wind was right, he and Abigail might see smoke from new farms far to the east and south. North and west remained primeval, unbroken except for the fields that they themselves had wrenched out of the woods and the rocks with three years of unrelenting work. Seth could feel that effort in every muscle of his back and shoulders.

Stumps from the trees they'd girdled and burned remained in the fields along with a few boulders too big for even the ox team to shift. But for acres around their cabin, the darkness of the forest had been replaced by the tender greens and pale, silky golds of wheat, oats, and maize. Sometimes when Seth went out to check his fields, he'd sit on a stump amid the smells of wood chips and humus and pollen and let the soft colors of cultivation expand in his imagination out to the horizon, erasing the woods with all their mysteries and dangers.

He might not see it, but his sons and daughters would. His son. His child, his children. Then Seth would feel the pain of futility:

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What if there were no children, no child? What had they done all this for?

Sometimes he lingered so long that Abigail had to call him in to eat. She would open the door of the cabin and step onto the stone stoop—a flat stone hauled in from the fields—and call, *Seth, Seth.* If he didn't answer right away, she would call again, with a high, sad, frightened note in her voice. He could hear the change even from the far end of the cornfield. Abigail hated the woods worse than he did, and some days even the fields, open, pale, rich with life, distressed her. On those days she hid in her dark, square kitchen.

When Janice Law's new novel *The Lost Diaries of Iris Weed* (Forge Books) was released in hardback last spring, *PW* called it a "superbly written thriller." The *New York Times* praised the novel's humor and sympathy, and *Kirkus Reviews* declared it, "Law's best so far." Ms. Law is the author of several other thrillers, and her Anna Peters mystery novels, with nine books in the series to date, were among the first to feature a truly modern woman detective. †

At first, she used to say, *It will be different when we have children. When the babies come, I'll feel different. I need a little life in the house.* But when the children didn't come, when she lost one early and one late, late enough so that their straw mattress was soaked with blood and her face turned pale as bleached linen, she stopped talking about company or about anything very much at all.

Which had suited Seth, at first. He was a silent man, inured to the quiet emptiness of the frontier. It was several months before he realized how silent his wife had become. He hadn't paid a great deal of attention to what she'd said, but he'd been used to the sound, which was to him like a familiar brook plashing and burbling, or the wind in the trees, or their hive of bees. Then the sound stopped and he felt its absence.

Still, she worked hard; Abigail was a good worker, a good wife; Seth would never say otherwise. The cabin was clean, not like some with dirt unswept on the floor and plates filthy, pots thick with grease. Their garden plot was neat; their chickens fat, their milk and cream made into good butter and cheese. And yet, her silence, which should have been a comfort, troubled him.

It was as if something, Seth wasn't sure what, had been turned inside out like a skinned rabbit. Even her announcement that she was pregnant again had not lifted his heart. He'd felt a momentary joy, then fear, then the uneasy sense of something wrong. One night he had incautiously remarked that her waist was still slim. After that, Abigail no longer let him touch her.

Lately she'd risen every morning ahead of him and once, waking

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early with the spring light, he'd seen her stuffing a little pillow down the front of her dress. He'd not been able to look at her thickened silhouette without dread since.

As her pregnancy advanced, Abigail began to talk again. She spoke of the child, of the boy they'd have, the boy who would help in the fields and take over the farm. Seth tried not to pay any attention, but though he could ignore the words, he could not shut out the joy and terror and despair he sensed behind them. If he wasn't careful, he might begin to wonder what would happen to Abigail and how they would manage if her mind went.

At about that time, the end of mud time in their fourth year, they began to see folks going westering again and others fixing to settle down nearby. Clear mornings working on his crop, Seth could sometimes hear the ring of axes and the crash of trees toppling on new-made farms. Oxcarts occasionally passed their cabin, and tired men and women stopped to ask for buckets of water from the spring. Abigail always came out to talk to the women, to admire their children, to hint shyly that it was getting near her time. She would stand for a long time watching the wagons creak away into the forest on the trail that was slowly widening into a proper track.

Sometimes she and Seth sold provisions to the travelers: eggs, butter, cheese, salad greens, a little smoked bacon. The money was handy, and the sales confirmed their prosperity and the rightness and luckiness of their decision to take up this raw western land. They were doing right, and plenty others were following in their footsteps.

One cool, wet day they were both in the cabin, sitting close to a good fire. Abigail was knitting and Seth was making the frame of a chair when they heard a wagon rumble to a stop. Outside, a pregnant woman stood beside a worn-out pair of oxen with one hand on their collar. The other held a switch, and she was turning her head this way and that in the misty rain as though listening for something.

"Morning," Seth called from the doorway.

She turned her head but did not look directly at him. Dampness had soaked her bonnet and stringed her long hair down around her shoulders. "Who's there?" A note between hope and alarm. "Is that a house? I thought I smelled a barn."

Seth went out to her, and at the sound of his feet she turned large cloudy eyes toward him, and he realized that she was blind. "My husband's took sick," she said. "I've been following the oxen."

The animals were standing with their heads down, looking ready to drop. "They're near finished," Seth said. "You can't take them much farther, the shape they're in."

"I been following the oxen," she repeated. Her voice held a stubborn querulousness, as if the state of the team had nothing

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to do with her.

"They'll need water," Seth said. "We have a good spring."

"God will bless you," the woman replied, but she did not move, and Seth saw that, like the oxen, she had reached the limit of her endurance. Just his luck. They had little enough fodder this time of year for their own oxen, and the new pasture was still thin. It was bad luck for them to be landed with her and near her time, too, by the look of her. Seth called to Abigail.

"It's my husband needs help," said the blind woman. She felt back along the ox cart and lifted the canvas flap. A tall, black-bearded man was lying wrapped in a filthy blanket. His face had all gone to bone; his closed eyes were dark rimmed and sunken, and the whole wagon stank of fever. He lay so still that it crossed Seth's mind the man might already be dead. "Haven't been able to do much for him," the woman said in a flat, detached voice. "It's hard for me to find water."

Seth felt a resentful fear at the thought of fever. How many farms had she passed? How many folks had told her to keep on going? If he'd had children, he'd have told her the same, Seth thought. As his fear struggled against his better nature, he saw that the woman's bare arms and legs were scratched from twigs and brambles and bitten all over by flies and mosquitoes.

His wife decided the matter by running out to tell the woman she must come inside. "For the sake of your child," Abigail cried with an anxious, almost a hungry look, as if, her husband thought, she feared these unwelcome strangers might decline hospitality.

The woman allowed herself to be led to the cabin, and Seth unhitched the team, took them to the barn, and hauled water for them. When he returned to the cart, half figuring and half hoping that things might be settled, he found the man returned from the dead, groaning and shivering, his whole body shaking. Seth fetched a clean piece of canvas from the house and wrapped the sick man up in it, leaving the filthy blankets in the wagon. He hauled the man, big but much lightened by his illness, into the cabin and laid him on the floor by the fire.

The wife sat with a bowl of fresh milk and a piece of corn bread left from breakfast, eating like a starved thing. When she'd finished the last crumbs, she said that they were Connecticut people, who'd been traveling in a good big wagon train until the fever came. She began to count off names, her voice indifferent. Then they'd lost their only daughter and stopped a day to bury her. The woman's face remained impassive, as if she were too exhausted even for grief, but her cloudy eyes filled with tears. Her husband had thought they could catch up easily, but he went off his head, yelling and singing, and she'd put him in the wagon and followed the oxen. "I find farms by the dogs and the smell of manure piles," she said.

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Abigail patted her hand, but Seth turned away, his face dark. Fool oxen could have stopped miles away, he thought, instead of about walking themselves to death and bringing this trouble. It was bad luck, and bad luck came in threes. Everyone knew that.

After lying some time by the fire, the man stopped shivering, and Abigail fed him a little hot water and whiskey, which quieted him some. The woman fell asleep in her chair.

"Those oxen can maybe pull by tomorrow," Seth said. "Day after, sure, if I give them some oats."

Abigail's face twisted with anxiety. "Oh no, Seth! She is near her time. She can't possibly travel."

"We could take her back a way. Get her some help. Jared Tompkins's wife is skillful. We could take her to Goody Tompkins."

"Goody Tompkins's is twenty miles or more," Abigail said. "And Goody Tompkins will want to be paid."

Seth shrugged. He thought it would be worth Goody Tompkins's fee to be rid of the sick man and the dazed, molelike woman. And two more oxen to feed. Even if they'd had plenty, even if they'd had more than enough feed, Seth would have wanted them gone.

"We will need to pay Goody Tompkins when our own child comes," Abigail said. She had a shy, nervous smile.

"That's true," said Seth, who understood that he must give in and felt sick at heart.

They tended the dying man all day, while the blind woman slept in the chair. Seth stripped off the man's filthy clothes and Abigail soaked them in a bucket and hung the stained trousers, shirt, and small clothes in front of the fire. Late that night, they were awakened by the sound of awkward steps in the cabin, of someone fumbling and bumping into things, before a high, keening wail raised the hair on Seth's neck and told him that the man was dead.

In the morning, Seth dug a grave at the edge of a clump of berry bushes adjoining the little patch of wildflowers where their last, sad infant was buried. The stranger's clothes were dry, so his wife was able to dress the body. Abigail sewed up the canvas for a shroud, then together she and Seth carried the body out to the grave, and Seth shoveled the soft, damp, black earth over the gray bundle. Abigail brought out the family Bible, and Seth read *I am the Resurrection and the Life.* He told the woman that next time a preacher came through, he would ask him to say a prayer.

"God has forgotten us," the blind woman said simply.

They both felt a kind of horror at this, Abigail at the great unwisdom of the idea, and Seth at its possible truth. She put her arm around the woman and hugged her, but Seth felt dismay. Now they had the woman with them permanently; there was no way she could go on alone. They'd have another mouth—maybe two—to feed and not a lick of work out of her. He could see that, for the

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blind woman sat by the fire on cool days and on the stoop out front when there was sun. Whenever he asked her plans, she said that she'd just followed the oxen, and those famished beasts seemed set to make up for long hunger and neglect by stripping his pasture and getting into his corn.

"She may have folks in the East," he told Abigail. "A woman alone, a blind woman alone, half-witted, too, by the look of it: Tell me how she's going to manage to farm."

"She's going to have a child," said Abigail, as if this answered all things. On anything to do with the blind woman, his usually mild and agreeable wife was unyielding. "And," she added, "when my time comes, I'll have a woman to help me. We won't have to send for Goody Tompkins."

It was on Seth's tongue to say, "The wilderness has turned your mind," but he could not do it. The blind woman grew swollen to enormous size, and Abigail, too. They padded around the cabin, swaying on their enlarged hips, stretching their tired backs, grunting when they brought up water from the well.

The blind woman now followed Abigail everywhere, learning the house and garden, finding her way to the chickens and the young pigs. And in another way, Seth saw, Abigail was following her, copying, he was sure, every movement, every adjustment of the woman's heavy body. So though his wife seemed happy, almost as happy as she used to be when they were young and hopeful back East on her father's farm, Seth began to stay out of the cabin. He lingered in his fields during the day and sat out on the stoop after dinner with his pipe.

In the evenings, Abigail knit garments for the children who were to be born. She would need flannel, too, she told Seth, and some new muslin and calico. Her dresses were just about ruined with letting out, and the baby, the babies, would need clothes. At first, Seth shut his ears to all this. The blind woman's baby was not his concern; he'd fed her and sheltered her and her team, too, and risked fever for himself and Abigail to do it. But then he looked at the woman's oxen, growing sleek and fat again, and thought he might make up some of their losses and solve two problems at once.

Seth proposed selling the team for her in the nearest village. With the money, she could get a trader to take her back East. The blind woman's cloudy eyes gazed just to the left of his face, and she sighed and nodded. Abigail made out a list of household necessities, and early one morning Seth made ready to leave. He brought in a heap of extra wood for the fire and left his great woodsman's ax by the door in case of trouble. Abigail could swing an ax about as well as any man he'd seen.

But now she said it was too big and heavy. "I couldn't hardly lift

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it now," she reminded him, her expression half coy, half annoyed, the way it always was when she had to remind him of her condition, the "pregnancy" which half broke his heart. Seth took the big ax out to the oxcart and returned with the little hatchet he usually carried when he traveled. He'd already hitched up the oxen, both his own and the blind woman's, before he had misgivings.

"Suppose her time comes," he told his wife. "Or yours. There will be *no one*."

Abigail said that they would manage, that they would hardly deliver the same day. She laughed at the idea, the first time she'd laughed in Seth did not know how long, and he said that he'd make all the time he could. "Three days," he said, "if I can find a buyer right away. They're good-looking beasts, I think they'll go quick."

Abigail kissed him, her face alight. "We'll be all right," she said.

Still, he wasn't sure, but though he could see plenty reasons not to go, Abigail was insistent. The longer he waited the more dangerous it would be to go, for suppose he *was* gone when one or both did deliver? And the babies would need clothes, flannel, some soft plain cotton. It would not do to lose a child to cold. The very thought set her trembling. Seth picked up his switch and told the team to walk on.

As it turned out, he was gone a full week. When he got to the village Seth found that a wagon train was expected soon. He waited three full days for it, and then another to dicker back and forth with the farmer who eventually bought the blind woman's team. Finally, Seth started for home, pushing his oxen as hard as he dared and thinking all the way that anything could have happened, but also, because it was a radiant early June day, that all would be well. He knew that he'd been right to wait for the wagon train, because he'd gotten a good price for the blind woman's oxen. As soon as she could travel, he'd take her into the village and one of the traders going east with furs and skins would see her back home. Seth carefully did not think of his own wife or of their child.

He spotted the thin blue plume of their kitchen fire long before he could see the cabin, and smelling the good, familiar, faintly sour smell of a wood fire, Seth told himself again that the blind woman would leave and that Abigail would be all right. They might even have a child eventually. If not, Seth was beginning to think of asking the minister back in the village to look out for a likely orphan, strong and bright. The wagon trains always seemed to wind up with one or two who'd be glad of a home.

The cabin door stood open to the sun, and white squares of stained cloth were drying on the line that ran from the corner of the cabin to the big elm that reminded Abigail of home. Seth heard an infant crying, briefly, as if shushed and comforted, and felt his heart clench. It was not fair that the blind woman should

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have a child and not his poor, hopeful, deluded wife. Seth felt how small, how pathetically inadequate, were the few ribbons and the fancy comb he'd bought as compensation; what were such little trinkets to a child, to a future?

This dark thought kept Seth from halooing as he usually did at the first sight of the cabin. Instead, he brought the cart into the yard, and he'd have gone on to the barn with the now eager team if Abigail had not stepped out on the stoop with a bundle in her arms. Seth stopped in his tracks. Her face was glowing, exalted; her belly as flat and thin as the day they'd wed. The child stirred in her arms. "This is Adam," she said. "Our son."

"And—" he asked and stopped. He could not name the blind woman, though she suddenly filled his thoughts.

Abigail's face took on a flat impassivity very like their guest's. "She died," said Abigail. "Her time came first, and she died and her child, too. You were right; we should have taken her to Goody Tompkins."

Seth felt a kind of horror mingling with hope, or perhaps it was a hope mingling with horror; he did not know what he felt, what he doubted, what he feared. "And where is she? This weather, we'll have to bury her quick."

"The ground was still soft over her husband's grave," Abigail said. "It was hot and I figured you'd been delayed on the road. I dug down as far as I could before my pains came on."

"Be a nasty job to rebury her." Seth watched his wife's face closely.

"I've been thinking we should put a little porch on the cabin," Abigail said. "We could haul this old stoop over and put it on top of the grave. It'd keep the animals out and be a monument to them."

First thing the next morning, Seth set out to trim up some logs for the floor of the new porch. He got his wedges and split some good pine logs, then shouted for Abigail to find his hatchet.

She stood, wary and puzzled, then pointed to the barn. One of the chickens had gotten egg-bound, she said, and had to be killed. Seth found the ax flung carelessly in the back of the barn, its usually gleaming blade discolored and threatening to rust. He had to put it back in order with his sharpening stone before he could trim up the planks.

When he was finished, Seth hitched the oxen to the stoop and dragged the big stone across the yard and past the barn to the grave. He didn't like the way the oxen's cloven hooves sank into the grave, nor the way the thick, flat stone plowed up the soft soil. But Abigail was right: The stone covered nicely. If it were carved, it would be as good as the big fancy stones back home, and by rights it should have been one of the family lying there. He wondered if Abigail had read something over the grave, but decided he did not want to ask her.

"It looks nice," she said. "Nice as you can get out here." She was

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holding the baby in her arms, rocking it back and forth with a smile on her face. She carried the infant everywhere like a Mohawk squaw, and the baby seemed healthy, though it cried a lot, and Seth wondered how she'd nurse it. He'd seen her dripping milk from Bess, their cow, into its mouth.

A day after he'd moved the stone, Seth was laying the floor of the new porch when Abigail cried his name with a strange high sound. He dropped his tools and ran into the cabin. She was standing holding the child at her breast, her face filled with a surprise so intense it was almost fear. "My milk has come in," she cried. "It's true what they say. Sometimes it can take a few days."

Seth touched her shoulder and dared for the first time to really look at the child with its matted hair and tiny hands and voracious mouth. "Adam," he said. And felt hope.

From that time, the baby thrived like a true child of the wilderness, a noisy, barefoot imp, fearless even in the darkness of the woods. Soon Adam was running about the house and finding his way to the chickens for their eggs and to the cow for her milk. When he was barely five, he could already lead the oxen and manage them with the switch.

"He'll make a good farmer," Seth said.

The boy was so bright and cheerful, so happy and eager, that it was easy for Seth to think of present and future happiness rather than of past questions and doubts. How deeply all these had been buried was revealed to Seth one day when a small train of wagons passed through. They were Connecticut people and one man in particular aroused both Seth's interest and his anxiety. The stranger was tall and wide-shouldered with a black beard and high bony cheeks. They were heading for new land in the Northwest Territory, he said, and hoped to find his brother there.

"Went out before you, then?" Seth asked.

The man held up the fingers of one hand. "Five years, it's been, and never a word. I been asking all along and I'll ask you, too: a big man with a beard like mine and a blind wife and a little girl of eight or nine? They drove an oxcart with one red spotted ox and one dun-colored beast."

Seth shook his head. " 'Course, not everyone stops. And we're a little off the main track," he said.

When they were gone, he wondered why he had lied when it would have been so easy to have set the traveler's mind at rest, so easy to have said, "Fever took the man—and they said the little girl, too—and the woman died in childbed. I can show you their grave. We put a good big stone over it." But Adam came running in from the field, whooping and capering, his fair baby hair gone dark now, almost black, and Seth knew he'd done the right thing, though he could not quite have said why.

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As for Abigail, her delight in the child knew no bounds. She made the neatest little clothes for him, played with him, sang to him, showed him, with endless patience, all she knew of everything in and out of the house. And Adam was a very likely lad but for one thing: He refused to read, and no matter how many times Abigail sat him on her lap, he never learned his letters.

To be read to was a pleasure he craved, but no sooner did his mother pull out the slate or attempt to trace letters in the Bible or in their battered blue-backed Shakespeare, than he was up and away like a wild creature. "He does not need book learning out here," said his father. "And he's young yet."

As Adam grew tall, he became handy with anything to do with tools or animals. Seth could see him taking over the farm in another dozen years, so his mind was at ease for the future. Almost. It was, Seth sometimes thought, because Adam was their only child that trifles, meaningless in themselves, provoked such anxious fears.

Trifles. The boy could not, no matter how he tried, sight the rifle Seth used to hunt squirrels and rabbits. And more than once, when Adam had been allowed a day away to play with the boys on the neighbor's farm, he returned in tears over the ball game which he could not master. Seth told himself that ball games were children's play, and one could live without squirrel meat.

One bright fall day, Seth and Adam had been clearing rocks and old stumps out of the original cornfield, the first, hastily cleared land he'd broken. After they'd loaded up the wagon with some flattish rocks for the foundation of a new shed, he told Adam to go ahead and tell his mother they were coming in for dinner. The boy ran off, his hands slightly outstretched the way he did, as if to caress the tall weeds that grew along the track.

Seth followed with the oxen. He had reached the barn and he was unharnessing the team when he heard a terrible scream of pain and horror. Seth sprinted around the corner of the barn, fear for his son flooding his heart. Adam stood perfectly still before the cabin, looking straight into the sun with a bewildered expression. His mother was on the porch, her face frozen in anguish. At that precise moment, Seth felt darkness opening inside him.

"Oh, Seth," she cried. "I have been so terribly punished. This is my fault! This is all my doing."

"Hush," he said, for he did not want to know what, in some way, he already understood. "We've known, haven't we, that his sight isn't good? He's still our Adam, who can do most anything . . ."

"It is my punishment," his wife sobbed wildly, her features distorted with terror. Seth opened his mouth, but it was too late to stop her.

"I killed the blind woman for her child," Abigail screamed, "and now she stands again before my face." ●

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The Oedipus Variation

by Antony Mann

"If you want to become a better chess player, you'll have to kill your father." Dr. Collins's elbows rested on the mahogany desk while his fingertips drummed annoyingly one against the other. Through his spectacles his almond eyes were expressionless, but he was smiling, so I naturally assumed he was cracking a funny. But he said, "I'm speaking figuratively, of course. All the best players do."

"What? Speak figuratively?" This was confusing.

It was a big, dim office. Collins sat with his back to the window. The slats of the venetian blinds were half shut, imprinting a lattice of sunlight on the dark green carpet. I sat by the tall fitted bookcase. The chair was a tan vinyl job, deep and surrounding.

In his late forties, Dr. Collins had olive skin and tight, wavy jet-black hair that was only now showing the odd touch of grey. His face was angular—a strong nose between high cheekbones above the square lines of his jaw. He'd kept in shape, and he wore one of those baggy beige suits and a white shirt with cufflinks. He shaved close.

Physically, he didn't remind me of my old shrink at all, but there was something about him . . . maybe it was the way he stared at me. Dr Hillier had done that, too, like I was a specimen in a bottle.

But what am I talking about? Collins wasn't a doctor at all—or rather, he was, except it was just that Ph.D. stuff people like to yabber on about, along with a superiority complex from Oxbridge. Collins wasn't treating me for anything, anyway. He was supposed

Antony Mann's crime fiction credits include appearances in the U.K. magazine *Crimewave,* and in 1999 he won Britain's highest award for short crime fiction, the Short Story Gold Dagger, for his tale "Taking Care of Frank." This is Mr. Mann's debut for *EQMM.* His original, somewhat eccentric subjects make his work stick pleasantly in the mind. We'll be presenting another of his off-center mysteries later this year.

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to be my new chess tutor—so what was it with the line about patricide?

"Listen, I don't need my time wasted," I said. "You told me that you could increase my chess rating. Guaranteed."

We chess-heads got the system for measuring comparative chess ability from a Hungarian physicist, a guy called Arpad Emrick Elo. Ratings have been named after him since 1970. As I'd told Collins over the phone, I was currently playing at around 2100 Elo. It meant I was good for an amateur, but it didn't stack up against the pro players or the true elite. These days the World Champion clocked in at around 2800.

"I meant what I said, of course," said Collins smoothly. "You're conversant with these?"

He waved a hand at the stack of books on his desk, beside the family snap and the bowl of unshelled peanuts. I could see the spines. They were chess books, among them some of the greatest: Fischer's *My Sixty Memorable Games,* Kotov's *Think Like a Grandmaster,* Nimzowitsch's *My System* and *Chess Praxis.*

"Sure I know them. Who doesn't?"

"Recommended by previous teachers, perhaps? Along with their own tuition book, called something like *The Easy Way to Chess Mastery* or *The Chess Web Untangled?"*

"Well, yeah, but . . ."

"Tell me, how much did your rating improve under those tutors?"

"To be honest, it didn't, but . . ."

"Forget them. Forget them all." In one violent gesture, Collins swept the books from the desk. It was a premeditated display, but still I flinched as they clattered to the floor. Collins tapped a finger against his temple. "It's all in here. Certainly, those books will help you get so far"—he dismissed them with a wave—"but all the best chess players have one thing in common: the base psychological drive to kill the king. Checkmate. And the need to do it over, and over, and over." He leaned forward and smiled a salesman's smile. "I can give you that need."

"You can?"

"I can. I will. You've heard of Kramnov."

"Vasily Kramnov?" He was the current World Champion, the best of the contemporary school of glowering Russian chess dynamos.

"He hates his old man," said Dr. Collins. "Has done ever since childhood. Makes no bones. In fact, he's quite proud of it."

"I didn't know that."

"It's no secret," said Collins with a shrug. "Simon Greaves, the new British prodigy?" There was always a new British prodigy. "Can't stand his dad. Source of constant sorrow for Greaves

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Senior, but he's a good sort and puts up with it, because you never know, the boy might be World Champion one day. Then there's Svensson, the Icelander. Tried to stab his father before he was out of the cot. Al Copeland, the American? Poured boiling fat down his father's neck at the dinner table one night. And Belsky, the Slav. Killed his father a few years ago. Rat poison."

"I remember that," I said. "He's doing time, isn't he?"

"Twenty years. He's turned into a damn fine correspondence player." Dr. Collins picked up his pencil and let it drift into notepad range. "Tell me something, Chris. How badly do you want to be a good chess player?"

"I want to make a career out of it."

"But do you know *why?* What is it exactly that draws you to the game?"

"Well, I dunno. I'm smart, and I've always been quick-minded. It appeals to me."

"You've never had any urge to play, any compulsion?"

"Not really," I said. "I just like the idea of it."

"Any brothers or sisters?"

"No."

"Married? Single?"

"Single. What's that got to do with it?"

"Tell me, how's your relationship with *your* father?"

"Pretty good," I said. "We argue sometimes, but not seriously. You know, the older I get, the more I think of him as a friend, not just my dad."

It was the turn of Dr. Collins's finger to point at me. "And that's why you're going nowhere fast! Your desire to succeed at chess is purely intellectual. You don't *feel* it. You don't have the drive. As things stand, you can study as hard as you like, but occasional father-son spats aren't ever going to get your rating beyond 2200. To reach 2400, you need at least a major falling-out, and you don't have a hope of making Grandmaster without a deep-seated, enduring rift. Unresolved, of course."

"What about Super GM?" I asked. "2700 or greater. That's what I really want."

Dr. Collins shook his head sorrowfully. "I don't know, Chris. That's going to take hate."

"I can hate," I said. "I'm good at hating."

"Sure, sure, we can all hate. But can you hate *pathologically?*"

"I can't say for certain," I said. "But I'll never know unless I try, will I?"

"That's the spirit!" He was jotting notes on the pad. "I'm going to give you some exercises to practice over the next month or so. When you feel you've mastered them, I'd like you to enter a chess tournament and see if you can improve on your normal perfor-

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mance. After that, make another appointment and we'll look at where we stand. All right?"

I rang my father that night. Since Mum's death three years before, we'd been working hard to stay in touch. We usually spoke at least twice a week.

"Dad?" I said when he answered. "I have a bone to pick with you."

"Oh, really?" said Dad. It was unlike me to pick bones.

"Yes, really. You remember that book I lent you, about growing organic vegetables? Well, you never returned it."

"Oh, sorry, son." He sounded confused. "You should have let me know. Tell you what, I'll bring it round Tuesday."

That was our chess night. It was Dad who taught me the game in the first place. He'd been an expert once, and though he was touching fifty now, he could still give me a game.

"That's not the point, Dad. That book belongs to me. I don't need it. I just want it, okay?"

"All right." For a moment, he said nothing. Then, "We still on for Tuesday?"

I knew how much he looked forward to it.

"Can't this week," I said. "I'm busy."

I felt pretty guilty when I put down the receiver. I felt like a weasel, but it was all for a good cause, and over the ensuing weeks, my weaselhood developed in tandem with the completion of the tasks that Dr. Collins had set me. I stood my father up. I insulted him in public. I failed to return his calls. On one occasion, on the pretext of apologising for my previous rude behaviour, I bought us tickets for Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and spent the whole first two acts laughing boorishly at the Willie Loman character. Dad walked out in embarrassment.

By the time the Greater London Open came round, I felt dog-low. I also played the best chess of my life, coming in clear second in the Major with a performance rating of 2295. Won six, drawn four, lost none. I hadn't practiced for the tournament at all, and yet I experienced a clarity of vision and depth of understanding at the board that in the past had always eluded me.

I made an appointment to see Dr. Collins the following week.

"You should have seen me!" I was striding up and down his office, waving my arms all over the place. "I crushed them like worms! It was fantastic, the looks on their faces as they squirmed in their seats, as they realised they were about to lose! I've never played with such authority, such ruthlessness! With such . . . power!"

"That's exactly what we're doing here," said Dr. Collins from behind his desk. On its front right-hand corner, where the stack of

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books had been, a watermelon and a meat cleaver sat side by side on a large wooden cutting board. "Facilitating the process of empowerment. You're very perceptive to pick up on it so soon. You completed the exercises?"

"Yeah, yeah."

"How do you feel about *that?*"

"Not great. Dad's been on his own since Mum died. I'm the only family he has left. The look on his face when I told him he was a pathetic old loser, you should have seen it. I almost apologised."

"It's okay to feel bad," said Collins soothingly. "You're going through a difficult time right now. You're on the transitional path. Keep in mind what lies at the *end* of that path and you'll be fine." Dr. Collins certainly made a convincing argument. "You're basically a good person, Chris. It's not your fault that things aren't running smoothly between you and your father."

"Really?" I said.

"Well, of course it is, but not in psychological terms. Technically, it's always the fault of the parent." He tapped the watermelon with the end of his pencil. "You see this?"

"I wondered about that. Lunch?"

"Actually, the melon symbolises a healthy father-son relationship." He picked up the cleaver and in a swift and practised motion sliced it cleanly down the middle. The two halves spun sluggishly. Juice dribbled onto the cutting board. He held one half up, twirling it back and forth in his hand like a basketball. "This is your goal."

"To be half a watermelon?"

"To be half a watermelon that can play brilliant chess! You've made a good start, Chris, but there's a way to go yet. You've cultivated your feelings of guilt. It's time now to start working on resentment." He cut a thin slice of melon from the other segment. "Fancy a piece?"

At resentment, I turned out to be a dab hand, as Dad discovered when he called a few nights later.

"Hey, Chris!" he said, trying to keep his voice as light as possible. "You missed our Tuesday night again."

"So?"

"You could have let me know ahead of time, is all. I waited an hour, then couldn't even get you on the phone. I was worried. I thought something might have happened."

"I was busy. I'm going to be busy a lot, now that I've decided to be a professional chess player."

There was a brief silence, then, "What about your job at the council chambers?"

"I knew you'd think it was a stupid idea."

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"No, it's a great *idea*. It's just that . . . are you good enough? There are so many young Turks out there now, hungry for blood. You've told me yourself. You're twenty-seven, Chris, not seventeen. It's very unusual for a player your age to improve markedly."

"But it does happen," I said.

"Yes, it can happen, but . . ."

"I have a new teacher. Dr. Collins."

"You've had a lot of new teachers."

"This one's different."

"How are you feeling, son?" I picked up on the concern. Dad hadn't spoken to me in this wary tone since around the time Mum died. He hadn't needed to.

"I feel fine. Why?"

"It's just that you don't seem to be yourself lately. Remember what happened with Dr. Hillier."

"Dr. Hillier? What's it got to do with him?"

"There's no need to be aggressive. I was only . . ."

"Maybe aggression's a good thing, did you ever consider that? I came second in the Greater London Major the other week." Then, for good measure, I threw in, "No thanks to you."

"Congratulations. Not that I want to claim any credit for your achievements, of course."

"And that's just the problem," I went on. This was working out great. "You've just washed your hands of me, haven't you?"

"Chris, if you'd like me to take more of an interest, you only have to say so."

"What, and have you sticking your nose in everything I do, trying to louse it up? No thanks."

"I'm quite prepared to give you as much space as you need."

"So you want to abandon me," I said.

"I'm here for you whenever you need me, you've always known that."

"Yeah, you've never let me live my own life." Ouch. This was hurting me—admittedly less than it was hurting Dad—but there was a big tournament coming up, and I was determined to do well. I was just about to slam the receiver down in his ear when he spoke again, softly this time.

"I know it was hard for you when your mother died," he said, "and I know we don't talk about it enough, and that's probably my fault. But she was my wife, Chris. I spent twenty-eight years with that woman." I could hear him choking back tears, yet he carried on, trying to bridge this new gap between us. "It's still very hard for me to talk about it. It always will be, and I'm sorry about that. If there's anything I've done to make you feel this way, you've got to tell me. I don't want to lose you too, Chris."

"It's just 'you you you,' isn't it, Dad?" I said, then I hung up.

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"You will not believe it! You will not believe it!" I spat out the words like short-hand jabs.

"Good news, Chris?" said Dr. Collins demurely from his chair.

"Seventh place in the Bristol Open!" I stomped round the office, making the floorboards shudder. "Two International Master scalps and a rating performance of 2435! All right, so I lost a game, but listen, I did not like it one bit! I hate losing. Losing is for losers!"

"Calm down now, Chris," said Dr. Collins. "There's a good lad."

"Yes, yes, of course! Calm down! Calm down!" I spotted the flowers then, fresh yellow daisies in a cut-glass vase sitting on the desk where the books and the watermelon had been. I picked up the vase and turned it over roughly in my hands. Water sloshed onto the carpet. "So what do these symbolise?"

"Nothing."

"Really?" My voice was cracking. "You mean the flower stems in water don't represent the penis penetrating the vagina? They don't represent my mother and father thrashing about in the back of a car somewhere, panting like apes?" I hurled the vase against the wall. Remarkably, it didn't smash. It bounced, once off the wall, twice after it hit the carpet. Water and bits of daisy flew in all directions. Collins was caught in the splash radius. He took a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed at his face and jacket.

"Actually, my wife bought those for me yesterday."

"Who?"

"She thought they'd brighten up the office a little."

"Oh. Sorry. Well, they looked lovely."

"Thank you. Tell me, Chris, how is your father?" he asked.

"Dad?" I sat down. "I've done some bad things."

"Bad things?" echoed Dr. Collins.

"Nasty things."

"And how does that make you feel?"

"Not great."

"Well, that's normal," said Collins. "In fact, it's an integral stage in your development. Remember, whatever you feel, whatever you end up doing, it's all part of giving yourself permission to be a great chess player." For such an irritating man, his voice was kind, without a hint of judgement. "I think you're ready for hate now."

A mere novice at the hate game, I had to work at it, but the Microtel International Chess Congress in London was approaching, so I didn't stint. I felt guilty enough about my contrived resentment that I was able to tap into a growing reservoir of self-loathing, and by deliberate steps I projected this from myself onto my father, blaming him for how I'd come to feel about him. It was clearly all his fault, otherwise why would I resent him for it in the first

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place? And since it *was* all his doing, that left me utterly blameless. But if I wasn't responsible in any way, then what right did he have to make me feel so bad? It was the sort of thinking I could have used to hate anyone, let alone Dad.

I called him on Saturday morning—before Round One of the Microtel—to see what he would think of my newfound emotion.

"Dad?" I said. "I'd like to bury the hatchet."

"Really?" He'd been sounding a lot older lately, as if the weariness of the world was settling upon him, but now he perked up a bit. "Chris, that's great! I'll confess you've had me a little worried recently. . . ."

"In your head."

"I'm sorry, I . . . ?"

"You heard me. I've got a game in . . ." I checked my watch, ". . . just under forty-five minutes. I'm coming round afterwards to settle things between us once and for all."

"Chris, I think maybe you ought to . . ."

I slammed the phone down in his ear. I felt pretty wretched, as though I had just opened a wound which only violence would shut. I figured I was ready to play.

I won my game that morning with an ease which not only surprised me but also confounded my opponent, the highly fancied Latvian Grandmaster Grigor Drezhev, whose reputation for arrogance and rudeness preceded him. I matched him in every department. It took me only twenty-four moves to wipe the sneer off his face. I mated his king against the side of the board, and as I did so my upper lip curled in a supercilious celebration of victory, my first against a Grandmaster. I took note of the look in Drezhev's eyes: the pain of losing, the disappointment and the doubt. The hammer blow against his ego was my true reward.

Tomorrow's game, though, would be tougher. I would have to stoke my boiler in the meantime.

He didn't hear me coming. I had taken my shoes off and left them outside on the floor. The door was ajar. Soundlessly, it swung inwards at my touch. I made no noise as I walked across the floor in my socks. His back was to me as he sat dozing in his chair, facing the window. If it really had been my intention simply to tell him that in some sense I owed my victory to him, that without him I could not have done it, why did I have the weapon in my hand in the first place? And why was I wearing gloves?

Collins was a tough man, but there's not much you can do with a hatchet sticking into your head, except be dead.

"Hello, Dad?"

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"Chris? Is that you? How are you feeling? I've been worried sick."

"I'm okay. I just had to deal with a transference problem, but it's sorted now."

"Transference? You mean . . . Dr. Collins?"

"Yes."

"I thought he was your chess tutor, not a psychoanalyst."

"So did I. Oh, and Dad? Any chance you could give me an alibi for about three o'clock this afternoon?"

There was silence at the end of the line.

"Dad? Are you there?"

"This isn't another Dr. Hillier-type episode, is it?"

"Sorry."

"Jesus, Chris, I was afraid something like this might happen. Well, okay. We were here playing chess the whole time, all right? But this is the last time!"

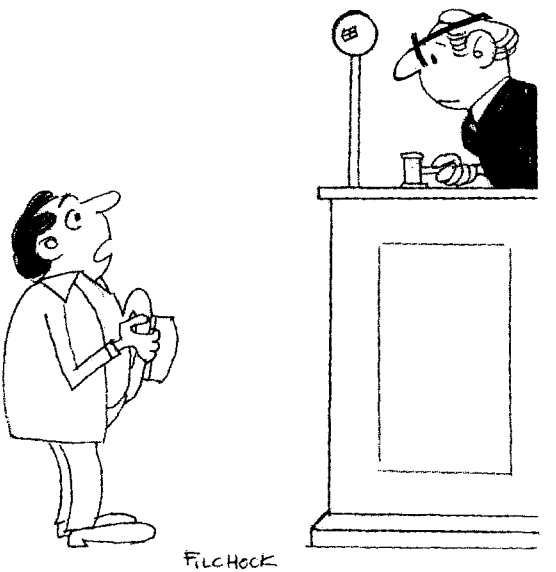
"Thanks, Dad, you're the greatest! By the way, I beat Drezhev in the Microtel International this morning, but I've decided to drop out of the tournament. For some reason, now that I won't be . . . ah . . . seeing Dr. Collins anymore, I don't feel the same desire to win."

"I'm relieved to hear it, son."

"Yeah. I bet you are. So. Are we on for this Tuesday?"

"I'll be waiting here with the pieces set up."

"Actually, Dad," I said, "how would you feel about a switch to backgammon?" ●



"PLEASE MAKE IT A SHORT SPEECH THIS TIME, YOUR HONOR. YOU KNOW HOW I FEEL ABOUT LONG SENTENCES."

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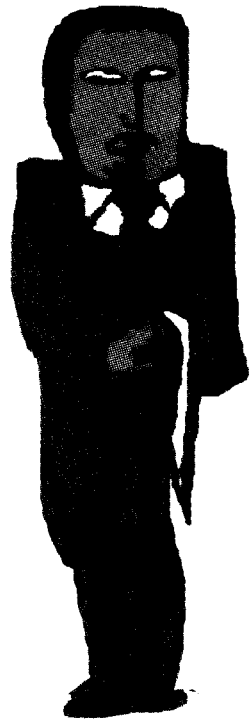
A Lead Pipe Cinch

by Devona R. Wyant

The slayer struck at midnight.
When the servants were asleep.
And the houseguests numbered ten,
each with a motive deep.
So the Inspector at the door
eyed the butler keenly;
perhaps he was the answer
to this murder most unseemly.
His livery was clotted,
his cuffs were tinged in red.
That bulge within his vest;
could it be a pipe of lead?
The butler's eyes were shifty,
and his alibi proved weak,
as in one room they gathered,
to hear the Inspector speak.
"I confess to you I'm lost.
I haven't solved the case.
The killer has escaped
and he hasn't left a trace."
"I say," spoke up the heir,
"But what about old Jeeves?
The clues all point to him . . .
that stain upon his sleeves."
The Inspector shook his head.
"Oh, that's only an old spot.
Each hackneyed British mystery
seems to use this plot.
The butler *never* does it.
Do you take me for a fool?"
And Jeeves alone did know:
The exception proves the rule.



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Art by Laurie Harden

THE LETTER

by Dorothy Salisbury Davis

The letter came after her parents left for the city. Until the last minute, she had expected to be taken along even though her father had said she was not to go. Sometimes he relented, but not this time. So she stood at the door and looked out as they drove off. She wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of tears. It wasn't really a big lie she had told, and she'd said she was sorry as soon as she was found out.

"Sorry's not enough," her father said. "Do you lie to the sisters at school?"

"No."

"Then why can't you tell the truth at home?"

She had not quite suppressed the shrug in time. It was a gesture she had picked up from one of the older girls.

"Stop that!" Her father hadn't struck her, but he looked like he wanted to.

It was the shrug she was being punished for, she thought now. He ought to have said so. Wasn't it a lie for him not to? She went to a window at the front of the house and watched until they disap-

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peared from sight. They were not going to come back for her.

The dog, Jock, nudged her hand with a wet muzzle. She kicked at him, not to hurt him, but she did not want sympathy. She wanted to do something mean, but not to him, not to any dumb animal, only to a human being. She thought of Micky, the hired man. She didn't like him very much. He was polite to her when her father was around, and spitting mean when he wasn't. She was not supposed to go near him when her parents weren't home. That made it tempting. She'd like to see just how mean he could get. She knew how to take care of herself. She was twelve, and big for her age. But the rural mail delivery truck pulled up to the driveway just then, and the mailman put a book-sized package and some letters in the box. It was the promise of a book that made her go out to pick up the mail on that sultry Saturday morning in late September, 1927.

Dorothy Salisbury Davis's first mystery novel was published in 1949. In her long and distinguished career she has earned the MWA's Grand Master Award and the Bouchercon's Lifetime Achievement Award. She continues to produce thought-provoking tales such as "The Letter," which is so believable it's a mirror we can hold up to our own family relationships, though the setting is seventy-five years past. ¶

The book was nothing but another volume of a children's encyclopedia that arrived on the monthly installment plan. The one handwritten letter, addressed to Mr. and Mrs. Thomas J. Dixon, looked foreign although the two-cent stamp was USA. She could not make out the smudged postmark. The writing looked a little like her father's, only not so round. He always rolled his hand three or four times, his arm on the table, before he started to write. Like letters that came from her aunt in England and her mother's cousins in Ireland, this one had no return address on the envelope. She held it to the sun. She could see the writing on lined paper, but the way the paper was folded, the words seemed to cross one another out. Except for the greeting: "Dear Margaret and Tommy." Lainie had never in her whole life heard anyone call her father Tommy. His own sister Eleanor wrote him "Dear Thomas." She wondered if the letter could be from her only living grandparent.

All she knew about him was that he was very sick and had to live in a hospital far up north. She assumed he had consumption. Somebody was always dying of it in the letters from Ireland. Her mother hadn't said that was what ailed him, and Lainie hadn't thought about it. Her father couldn't remember anything about him. He'd run away from home when he was twelve. Lainie thought if she ran away—and she had dreams of doing it—she

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would certainly remember *her* father.

She dawdled returning to the house. To tell the truth, she liked to be home alone. It was just that she liked to go to the city better, to ride on the moving stairs in the Boston store with her mother, who was always afraid Lainie would lose her balance and fall when she herself was the one who almost toppled getting on and off. That summer her father had taken her to a ball game at Wrigley Field while her mother went to the beauty parlor. Lainie could name every player on the Cubs, give his batting average, and tell you whether or not he chewed tobacco.

The air was muggy and smelled of manure. Micky was running the spreader in the west field. He was going to bring the smell with him into the house at suppertime. She unpacked the new volume of the children's encyclopedia, the letter S, and looked up the word shit. It wasn't there. Silly little books: She could have read the whole set of them when she was seven years old.

She sat at her father's desk and rolled up the top. The mail went into a wire basket there. She took a last look at the letter. Tommy: If you called him Tommyhawk, maybe. Tommyhawk Dixon. The idea made her laugh. She got the magnifying glass from its case, and, letter by letter, made out the postmark: Jamestown ND. North Dakota. That was up north, all right. If it wasn't for *Dear Margaret and Tommy,* she'd have guessed it might be from an Indian mission or somebody selling land. She expected to find out when her father read the letter aloud to them after supper. But she'd just bet he wouldn't read "Dear Tommy." Lainie put away the magnifier and closed the roll-top. The desk took up the whole corner of the dining room. Neither Lainie nor her mother was allowed more than to look at it, and dust it once a week. There was one drawer, the top, side drawer, they were absolutely forbidden to go near. It was kept locked anyway, the place where her father kept his service revolver and a box of cartridges. The government permitted him to keep his World War army rifle and the revolver. He was a deputy sheriff and he took target practice with the county officers. He drilled with the army veterans, too. He'd be in the Armistice Day parade. Her mother called him Captain Ever-ready, which made him spitting mad.

Lainie did the breakfast dishes and made the egg sandwich that Micky would pick up at the back door at noon. She was tempted to cheat him out of one of the chocolate Marsh-Mello cookies, but she didn't.

She went next to the living room to get her hour of piano practice over with. After the warm-up scales, she made up a connecting story while she played through her whole repertoire. With the marches, she could topple two or three of the family pictures on top of the piano. It did please her that morning to topple Captain Thomas

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Joseph Dixon, U.S. Army, in dress uniform. He had also served in the Spanish-American war, in the Philippine Islands. There was a wonderful big book with color pictures about the Philippines on the bottom shelf of the bookcase. The natives didn't have many clothes on and if you looked hard enough you could see their parts.

There'd used to be a picture of her grandfather up top in a wooden frame, the only picture of him she had ever seen, real perky looking, wearing a hat with a tassel and holding a violin and bow. She couldn't remember when last she saw it. It could have fallen into the corner in back of the piano. Her father said there was enough space back there to pitch a tent, the piano took up too much room. Her mother said his desk took up too much room, too.

When her parents got home, her mother went upstairs to change her clothes, one slow step at a time. She hated the stairs. Her father went first to his desk to look at the mail. He sat down and opened the letter and unfolded it carefully. His hand was shaking. When he saw Lainie watching him he sent her to bring her homework down. He'd go over it with her after supper. She hurried, but by the time she got back he was already closing the roll-top. He changed and went out to milking without a word to Lainie or her mother. She thought of telling her mother about the letter, but she didn't get to it. Her mother made her spitting mad, telling her about the movie that they had gone to see in the city. With Dolores Costello, Lainie's favorite actress.

"Did you have to go to that one?"

"I'll see it again with you," her mother said.

"You don't have to. I'd rather read than go to a movie anyway."

Lainie didn't expect her father to talk about the letter at supper with Micky at the table. They never did talk much, but that night the only thing was Micky making sure he'd get paid since Sunday was his day off and he was getting a ride right after breakfast. Her father paid him in cash out of his wallet when they got up from the table. He got eight dollars a week plus board and a room over the dairy.

Her father sometimes read aloud to them after supper if he couldn't get anything on the radio, but that night after going over Lainie's homework with her and not making a single correction, he sat at his desk and read *The Hoard's Dailyman* to himself. Lainie and her mother played casino at the dining room table. Lainie kept thinking of "Margaret and Tommy." She wanted to go upstairs and read *Wildfire* but she didn't want to miss anything. Finally her father took out his watch and wound it. "Bedtime, Lainie," he said.

"I think I'll go up now, too," her mother said.

"I'd like you to wait for me, Margaret."

Well, to hell with them, Lainie thought. Old Tommyhawk didn't

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want papoose around when he was powwowing with heap big squaw.

Just when she was able to get into her "golden dream"—she was a streetcar conductor in this one—her father's voice brought her wide awake. He was swearing, and he shouted, "No, no, no," and began to knock things out of his way as he went outdoors. Lainie raced to the hall railing and heard her mother call after him, "He's your own flesh and blood, Thomas."

Her mother came up the stairs as slow as a cow getting up. Lainie waited for her at the top.

"Go back to your bed," her mother said. "He'll be over it in the morning."

"Is it about my grandfather?"

"Och, Elaine, were you listening at the door?"

"I wasn't. It was what you said—'Your own flesh and blood.'"

"Did I say that? I don't think I said that, Lainie."

"I won't say anything," Lainie said, and went back to her room.

All through Sunday Mass she thought about the letter and the quarrel. She knew her father had run away from home when he was twelve. It must have been before that when he was called Tommy. She was no longer so delighted with herself for Tommyhawk. Her father was hunched down in the pew, his head on his hands. With him on one side of her and her mother, praying the rosary, on the other, Lainie felt closed in, trapped, like a sausage in a bun.

They met the O'Malleys on the church steps after Mass. They were Irish, but from a different county than Lainie's mother. You'd have thought it was a different country to hear her make fun of their brogue. But it was Ireland, and she enjoyed a visit with them once in a while. When Mrs. O'Malley suggested the Dixons come home to Sunday dinner with them, Lainie's mother put it up to her father. The hired man was off for the day and Lainie had finished her homework.

"The darling girl." Mrs. O'Malley gave her Mary Jo a poke. Mary Jo was the oldest of four and in the same grade as Lainie, but she never got above sixth or seventh in class. They didn't like each other and Lainie hated the rest of the O'Malley kids for letting their sister boss them around.

"Margaret, you and Lainie go," her father said. "I'd be glad to have the house to myself while I write the letter."

Lainie couldn't think of a worse arrangement: He was going to pick them up before milking. He would answer the letter to her grandfather and that would be the last she'd ever hear of it. "I want to go home with you, Dad. I'm feeling sick, and I've got the pain in my side again."

"Another time," her mother said to Mrs. O'Malley. Her husband was already sitting in their car, ready to blow the horn.

Lainie's father got his way. "You need to get out of the house,

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Margaret. The girl can go to her bed when she and I get home and we'll call the doctor in the morning."

"Is it the appendicitis, do you think?" Mrs. O'Malley sounded hopeful.

As Lainie got into the Chevy, her father looked at her as though he was reading her mind. He didn't say anything until they were outside the village limits. Then he said, "I don't suppose you're feeling well enough to drive the car."

There was nothing she loved to do more. "I'm feeling a little better." But he didn't stop.

"Please, Dad."

She knew she drove well. She'd once overheard her father say she'd soon be as good a driver as he was. But all he ever said to Lainie was, "Don't show off, now."

When they got into the house, Lainie said, "I don't have to go to bed, do I?"

"You've had a miraculous recovery, haven't you?"

"I did have a pain," she said.

All he said was, "Make us some sandwiches from last night's ham. Then you can go off on your own."

Lainie wanted to ask him about the letter. After all, she wasn't blindfolded when she brought it into the house. But she didn't dare come right out with it. Then, when they were at the kitchen table, she asked him, as though it had just popped into her head, "Dad, do I take after you?"

"What gave you that notion?"

"Mrs. O'Malley says I look like you."

"Mrs. O'Malley needs new glasses."

"I don't think you look like my grandfather, either." She knew it was a mistake the minute the words were out.

"Where's this grandfather business coming from? I had no idea you knew him that well."

"I make him up. That's all."

"Out of whole cloth?"

"From the picture we used to have on the piano. I pretended he played 'Turkey in the Straw' with me."

Her father took up his sandwich from where he'd set it down on mention of her grandfather. "Your aunt sent that from England. It was taken before we came to America. Eat your sandwich."

He didn't eat. He sat staring at something she couldn't see. Why can't he tell me? Lainie thought. I'm his own flesh and blood, too, aren't I?

"Mother's always telling me stories about how she grew up in Ireland, how her father took the kids to hunt for duck eggs in the river. She talks a lot about my grandfather Lavery."

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"So that should be grandfather enough for you."

"But he's dead."

That amused her father, a bit of a smile that made Lainie hope he'd tell her about her grandfather. She was sure he remembered. He had to. But he only kept looking at her, like he was trying to see through her, like he did when he was sure she was lying to him. He ate part of his sandwich and he threw the rest to the dog. Lainie would have liked to have had it. Jock didn't even eat the bread. All her father said was, "You're not changed out of your good clothes."

When she came down he was at his desk in his shirt sleeves. He'd hung his coat on the back of a dining room chair, and he was reading the letter again. Lainie thought that to hang up his coat in the hall would be a good excuse to go into the room.

It put him into a rage. "Will you get out of here, girl, before I do something I'll be sorry for! You're turning into a little sneak, Lainie. You're as sly as a lizard."

Lainie fled outdoors. Jock came as far as the door with her and then went back to her father. She was hurt, ashamed. She walked toward the river. She cut through the fields but kept the road in sight for a while. There were cars and dust; she did long to drive a car. Her father was going to buy a new one, brand-new, next year. They would drive to Boston, where her mother had friends. But not to North Dakota. She liked the idea of Boston better herself. It was only a dream, anyway, something she and her father read and talked about, the Old North Church, Concord, Lexington, a live history book of places.

She cut away from sight of the road and through woods. The leaves kept falling. If she found a perfect one, she'd send it to her aunt in England who'd never been to America. Red, yellow, orange, everybody liked maple trees the best. Her favorite was the oak, tall, rough, dark. At the river's edge, the trees were mostly willow. They reminded her of ghosts, the way they swayed whatever way the wind blew. One of the pieces in the songbook she played from sometimes went willow, tit-willow . . . "And I said to him, Dickie Bird, why do you sit, singing willow, tit-willow, tit-willow?"

She was almost home again when she heard her father's whistle. She didn't have hers. She'd got out of the house so fast, she forgot to take it from the kitchen hook. She moved a little faster, but not much. She wasn't in a hurry. After he left the house, then she'd hurry.

He didn't even ask where she'd been. All he wanted was to make sure she'd feed the chickens and get the cows in while he went for her mother.

There was nothing more poky than cows going into the barn. The more Lainie tried to push them ahead, the more stubborn they were, going into the wrong stanchions and having to be

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turned around to get them out. No matter how you tried, you couldn't shift a cow into reverse. All the same, Lainie got into the house well before her parents were due home. She could see from the door to the dining room that her father had left the roll-top up. She shoved Jock outdoors again and went to the desk. No letters. Only the box of Eaton's stationery, his pen and a bottle of ink, and the big blotter. She lit the lamp to see if she could read any words on the blotter. It was a terrible idea. She turned it off. But just from the way he'd left the desk, the top up, his writing things out, she got the feeling he mightn't be finished. He'd have stuck the letter—both of them, maybe, his and her grandfather's—in somewhere, put on his coat, and left. Not with her home alone, Lainie thought, not the way he felt about her now. If there was any letter there at all, it had to be locked in the gun drawer and she could forget it. But she wasn't going to forget it. She tried the drawer. It blasted wide open with a loud crack. Lainie leaped back. It wasn't the gun that went off; there was no smell, no smoke. Then she knew. It was a big ugly rat trap. It wasn't going to hurt her now, but it could have. The gun wasn't there. The trap had been set and put on top of the box of cartridges. Set for her.

She thought of trying to set it again, but she was shaking and they'd be home soon. She closed the drawer and went outdoors. What could she say? Say she hadn't gone near the desk? Pretend she'd been outdoors all the time, that she didn't know what happened? He'd know. She knew he'd know. Even if he didn't say anything, if he waited for her to tell on herself.

The dog sat on his haunches and watched for her next move. Dumb dog. What did he care what happened to her? She didn't care, either. But she did. She was the dumb one, to touch the gun drawer for the first time in her whole life. It was humiliating. "It was a dirty trick," she told Jock. "Dad's a mean son of a bitch."

Lainie watched from behind the garage. The trap had been real handy. He'd brought two of them into the house when her mother saw a rat in the root cellar. He swore he caught it, but she still wouldn't go down there. She'd send Lainie. When the car turned into the drive Jock raced to the welcome. Lainie took her time, but she followed them into the house.

They'd brought home the Sunday paper this time. Her father left it on the kitchen table while he went into the hall to change into work clothes. Her mother shook up the fire and put on the kettle first thing. She always did. Her mother said the O'Malley meat was as tough as bull's beef, and she was glad she'd put away a bit of ham after last night's supper. Lainie didn't tell her what had happened to it. She listened to her father go from the hall into the dining room. She took the paper into the living room and tried to read the "Teenie Weenies." Her heart started to thump when she heard the

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ratchety sound of the roll-top closing. But her father went outdoors through the kitchen without a word to anyone except the dog.

The only talk at the supper table was her mother's about the O'Malleys. She could make you laugh, the way she told things, but nobody laughed. At last her father put his knife and fork crosswise on his plate.

"So, Elaine, you fed the chickens and brought in the cows. What else did you do, you're always so busy?"

She didn't say anything.

"Lainie, get the pudding from the icebox," her mother said.

"The girl's talking to me, Margaret." He didn't take his eyes off Lainie.

It was no use trying to pretend she didn't know about the trap.

"When I came in from the barn," she started, "I was going to set the table and I noticed you hadn't closed your desk like always. Then I noticed the gun drawer didn't look tight, and I was trying to close it when the trap went off inside. It almost scared me to death and the drawer blew open." She stopped. She was saying too much and she hated herself.

"Is that all?"

Lainie nodded.

"Now start over and this time tell the truth."

"I thought you might have hidden the letter there."

"Where you were forbidden ever to touch."

"I know."

"Oh, you always know. You always know everything."

"If the letter was from my grandfather . . ."

He cut her off. "What made you think that?"

"Tom," her mother said, a plea.

"You stay out of this, Margaret." He turned to confront her mother, where she sat on one side of him, opposite Lainie. "Or have *you* been telling tales to her?"

"She didn't tell me anything, Dad. I just pretended."

He turned back to Lainie. "Pretended what?"

"Pretended the letter was from my grandfather."

"And what did you pretend it said?"

"That he'd come and live with us. He wasn't sick anymore. He'd bring his violin . . ." More and more ideas popped into Lainie's head. "He'd tell us about bears and moose and Indians . . ."

"All right, Lainie, that's enough. Your grandfather is still sick and he's not going to get better, and he's not going to come and live with us."

He'd won again, Lainie thought. Next he'd say what her punishment was going to be. She didn't care. She'd even like to say thank you.

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"Lainie," he started, "I didn't think for a minute you'd open that drawer."

"That's a lie!" she shouted. "You did!"

It happened so fast she didn't see it coming, the back of his hand across her face. She was dizzy before she knew she hurt. Her eyes misted but she saw her mother pick up her knife and shake it at him. "Don't ever lay your hand on the girl again." The knife clattered to the plate.

"She will not defy me, Margaret. I'll break her will if it's the last thing I do."

"She's not a horse, Tom."

He pushed away from the table and slammed out of the house. The only sound was Lainie's sniffle.

Lainie omitted her father from her prayers that night and included her grandfather. She couldn't imagine him without the violin, so she thought of them playing together the way she'd made it up before. She'd like to be a musician, but she didn't think it would ever happen. It wasn't one of her favorite things till now. Maybe he could teach her. She wasn't going to get very far with Sister Benedict and her metronome, seventy-five cents a week. Seventy-five cents wouldn't mean much to her grandfather. Doctors and hospitals cost a lot of money, unless you were a veteran. She just knew her grandfather wasn't. He'd come over to Canada from England with two sons and their stepmother when Lainie's father was five. She knew these things from her aunt's letters: How she wished she'd listened better! Aunt Eleanor had been raised by an uncle who made bells and iron fences. Lainie knew she was rich because she'd helped Dad buy the farm. She'd pay the hospital bills for Grandfather. Lainie was beginning to write letters to her aunt. Her father always wanted to read them first. He'd make her write some of them over. To hell with him.

Lainie had closed her bedroom door. Her mother came in and tucked her in with a "God bless" and left the door open. Her father did not like to see it closed. Lainie got up and closed it. To hell with him.

Lainie woke in the morning to the sound of her father shaking the grate in the kitchen range. It wasn't even daylight and she'd been dreaming. Her grandfather was in the dream. He had a gun he was showing her and it went off. Then what happened at the table came back to her, so real she jerked her head out of the way. That part wasn't a dream. Jock bounded into the room and jumped on top of her, all yips and slobber. He raced out as fast as he'd come and Lainie got out of bed feeling as heavy as her mother. In the bathroom she examined her face in the mirror. There wasn't even a

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bruise. Her father called up the stairs to her softly, not to waken her mother. Lainie figured it meant that Micky hadn't got back and she'd have to help out in the barn. She wasn't in a hurry to get dressed. Her father called up again. "Just come down as you are."

He was standing in front of the stove, the front lid off; he fed more kindling into the flames. Then he took the letter from his breast pocket. He showed her the envelope. "You've seen it before, haven't you?"

She nodded.

He took the letter from the envelope, unfolded it, and put it to the flames. He held it until what dropped last from his fingers was no bigger than a snowflake. He licked his fingers where he'd burned them and held the envelope to the fire in the same way. She could smell the scorched hair on the back of his hand.

"Now let's have some peace in the house," he said. He looked at her as though he wanted her to do something or say something, but she couldn't.

He picked up the coal bucket and stoked the fire, then he went out, sending Jock ahead of him.

When her mother came downstairs, Lainie told her, "He burned Grandfather's letter."

"Who is *he?*" her mother said.

Lainie wanted more than anything that morning to get away from the house as fast as she could. Maybe forever, she told herself. Her father'd run away when he was twelve. He was so proud of it, it was the only thing he ever told about himself growing up. She did her chores, which included getting the laundry started for her mother. She had to go out and take the sheet and pillowcase off Micky's bed. He was supposed to bring them in, but he forgot. Half drunk, she thought, on a Monday morning. The bootleg stuff was going to kill him, her father said. She hoped it would. All the same, she was glad to see him pull up in the truck. He tooted the horn even though she was watching for him from the doorway. Either her father or Micky took the day's milk to the depot at the crossroad every morning. It was where, too, she was picked up for school.

They weren't out the driveway when he forgot the clutch when he tried to shift gears. "You're going to strip the gears," Lainie said.

"Smart alec," Micky said. "Going to tell the boss about it?"

"Maybe." She wouldn't.

"No, you won't. You're scared of what he'd say. He won't believe you against me. He knows you got it in for me. What did I ever do to you, Lainie?"

"Does he tell you everything that goes on in the house?"

"A man talks about some things." He took a rag from his pocket, wiped his nose, and put the rag on the seat between them. Lainie

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moved away. "I ain't catching," he said. He glanced at her and grinned. He didn't have many teeth, and the ones he had looked awful. After a while, he said, "He likes to tell about you when you were a good little girl. Told me he put you on his horse when he was in the army. You could ride a horse when you were two years old. Do you believe that?"

"Sure, the horse was willing." Lainie had heard the story often enough.

Micky gave a bark of a laugh. It sounded dirty.

"I mean it was a gentle horse—it liked me."

"I know what you mean, little Miss Lainie." He reached over and patted her thigh.

"Watch the road!" Lainie shouted.

They were in a rut and headed for the ditch. He jerked the wheel and got them to the middle of the road.

"I hate you," Lainie said. "I don't know why Dad doesn't fire you."

"Because I do him a day's work, and I know to call him boss."

It wasn't a good school day for Lainie, either. She was caught during catechism reading about North Dakota in her geography book. She put the book away. It wasn't going to tell her anything about her grandfather anyway. But it kept her from thinking about Micky better than the quiz on sacraments and sacramentals did. She could still feel where he'd touched her, and he'd looked at her that way before, like he was half asleep. She wondered if he told her father dirty stories. She'd heard them laughing in the dairy, but she never got close enough to hear what they were saying. She didn't want to hear it, either—but at the same time, she did.

Lainie sat on the kitchen stool and watched her mother iron. *Press.* She was pressing Lainie's father's army dress uniform. He wasn't going to wear it till Armistice Day, but he wanted it ready, and as long as she had the ironing board up . . . Lainie ate her pea soup. You could almost taste the ham.

"Don't *shlupp,"* her mother said. "You sound like Micky."

Lainie gave a long, noisier *shlupp.* "That's how Micky sounds. He's a pig."

"Don't let your father hear you say that." Her mother softened then, remembering something. Lainie could always tell when her mother was remembering. It seemed she almost always was. There'd be a story, long or short—like the crazy woman in Ireland who prayed out loud all through the Mass, "Haily holy, haily holy, haily holy . . ."

"I taught your father not to *shlupp.* I was giving him his supper. It was on my aunt Mary's farm before we were married. Wasn't I the bold one to mention it even? He went out of the house roaring the same as he does today. But I never heard more than an accidental shlupp out of him after that."

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Lainie washed her bowl. She waited to take over the ironing when her mother was done with the uniform.

"He wasn't long out of the army," her mother went on. "And not much more than a boy. I swear he hadn't stopped growing. His sleeves were never long enough. The army didn't want him after the war, either. Farming was the only thing he knew. He loved horses. More than people, I used to think. I'd try to get him to go to the church parties with me. Isn't it funny? Now he's the one that's into everything—the American Legion and the Foreign Veterans and Grand Knight of the Knights of Columbus, and him born an English Protestant." Her mother let the iron cool for a minute. "I've almost scorched his trousers. That's talking to you, I did that."

"Mother, do you hate Micky like I do?"

"I don't hate him, but he's lucky to be working for your father. He's what we called a *gobbeen* at home."

"He sounds like one."

"You don't even know what it means, Lainie."

"I'll bet I do. He's stupid and dirty and I'm always afraid he's going to touch me."

"Then don't go near him. You're not supposed to anyway."

"I have to ride in the truck with him, don't I?"

Her mother hung the trousers on the back of a chair. She turned to Lainie, quick as a cat. "Has he ever touched you? You know what I mean."

"No," Lainie said.

Her father was out that night. It was a week of meetings for him. Running himself to the bone, her mother said. It suited Lainie just fine. She finished her homework and left it for him to go over by himself when he got home. Her mother was listening to the radio in the living room. More static than music. She turned it off when Lainie went in. "I can't stand him," her mother said. It had to be Rudy Vallee.

Lainie took a volume of the children's encyclopedia from the bookcase. "I'm glad to see you using the little books," her mother said.

Lainie settled in the rocker under the lamp and looked up North Dakota.

"Is it something I'd be interested in?" her mother asked. She did love to be read to.

"North Dakota," Lainie said.

"I don't think I'd be interested in that," her mother said.

"That's where my grandfather Dixon is."

"I know that. I'll just sit here with my eyes closed for a few minutes. Don't let me fall asleep." What did she think about, Lainie wondered, that she never told? Were her stories about Ireland all

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true, even the crazy ones, or did she make them up? Lainie read the two pages about North Dakota. The Badlands interested her most. But she didn't learn anything about her grandfather. There was no mention of Jamestown.

"Mother, didn't you ever visit Grandfather Dixon?"

"I did not." Nothing more.

"Doesn't anybody visit him?"

"I don't know who they are," her mother said, and began to push herself up from the chair.

"I'm going to someday," Lainie said. "I don't care what Dad says."

"I'll go up now." Her mother stopped and looked down at her. She pulled Lainie's face against her, a smothering of laundry soap and lavender and sweat. "Lainie, Lainie, Lainie," she said, and at the door, "You'd better come up soon if you don't want your father in on you."

The next night the two of them were home by themselves again. The rain was heavy and Lainie thought there'd be a fight about her father going out in it, but her mother let him go with the caution to drive slow and come home early.

Lainie got out the cards, pencil, and tablet. "You owe me sixty-two cents from last June," she said.

"I'd rather owe it to you than cheat you out of it," her mother said. It was make-believe gambling anyway.

But the game soon lagged. Her mother had trouble keeping her mind on it. Finally, she gathered her cards without counting the points and set them aside. "I've been thinking all day of the Dolans, a family at home. I'm not sure of the name. I'm not even sure I knew them, or if I had it told me.

"They were a queer family. It was said they washed ashore from Scotland or one of the islands. They might have come down from the Spanish, way back—the pride or arrogance, they didn't fit. None of us owned the land we lived on—we couldn't, all tenant farmers without the nails to scratch ourselves, most of us. The landowners were a greedy lot. Oh, some of them weren't. But I'm getting away from my story.

"They said when Michael Dolan landed he'd bought a horse and a dray at dockside and drove it into town himself with two children—don't ask me how old, I don't know. It was long ago—two children and a long wooden box. It was his dead wife's body, though who in the town knew it at the time, I can't say. . . ."

Lainie knew. She could tell from the little roll of her mother's shoulders that she was speaking of the dead.

"Well, Michael Dolan arrived with a piece of parchment to show he'd inherited, freehold, a parcel of land above the town. It was always thought to belong to the absentee landlord who'd for years been collecting grazing money from us. So nobody begrudged

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Michael Dolan his inheritance. He buried his wife to the seaward side and settled in well enough for a stranger. But the town never took to him or him to the town, so people knew what they meant when they said Michael Dolan lived above the town.

"I don't know how long after when, lo and behold, the absentee squire showed up and took Michael Dolan to the courts, claiming the Dolan inheritance a fraud. I only know what I heard, mind you, your grandfather Lavery talking, but the squire won and ordered Dolan evicted. The first thing he wanted off the property was the remains of poor Dolan's wife, and, cruel devil that he was, he made Dolan the gift of a plot in the town graveyard.

"Well, Dolan lay in wait for the squire one night and killed him dead. The next day he was digging up the wife's coffin himself when they arrested him. He was tried and found guilty, but instead of hanging or prison, he was committed for the rest of his life to the asylum for the insane."

Lainie's mother drew a breath you could have heard in the next room. "It's a sad kind of love story, isn't it?"

"Oh, wow," Lainie said. "What happened to the children?"

"I knew you were going to ask that, and I don't know. It must have been terrible hard for them, their father put away like that."

Lainie lay awake a long time thinking about Michael Dolan. She heard her father come home and send Jock out to pee in the rain. She hoped the dog wouldn't come up and shake himself in her room.

Lainie got permission during study period the next day to spend it in the library—a room divided between books and first aid—the library-infirmary. Except for Sister Alberta working at the sink, she had the place to herself. Alberta was not a busybody, but she reminded Lainie she was not allowed to sign out books during school hours.

"I've read them all anyway," Lainie said.

"I can believe that you've read most of them," the nun said.

"Most of them," Lainie repeated, and lugged the atlas from its shelf to the table. The map of North Dakota had a whole page, and it didn't take long to find Jamestown. It was on the James River and on the Northern Pacific Railway line. Population at last census, 5265.

She closed the book and sat a minute. At least she could be sure now there was a town called Jamestown. It wasn't mentioned in the children's encyclopedia or her geography book. She returned the atlas to its shelf. The library had two large sets of encyclopedias.

Sister Alberta came from the sink, rolling down her sleeves. "Do you need help, Lainie?"

"Which encyclopedia is best, Sister?"

"Better," Alberta said.

"Better," Lainie repeated.

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"I'd put it this way," the nun said. "The *World Book* is easier to read. But if you can't find what you're looking for in the *World Book,* you may find it in *Britannica.* But if you don't find it in the *Britannica,* you're certainly not going to find it in the *World Book.*"

It took Lainie half a second. "I should look in *Britannica* first."

"That's it," Alberta said.

Lainie liked her. She talked to you like a person, and she knew how to throw a baseball.

There was a Jamestown, North Dakota, USA, in the *Encyclopedia Britannica.* Lainie didn't read what it said line for line. Her eyes leaped to the word *hospital,* and she read: "The State Hospital for the Insane is just beyond the city limits." The room turned nearly upside down and then came right again. She pretended to read the book until Sister told her that the bell was about to ring for the next class.

Lainie mixed and solved things in her mind in the hours and days after that. She didn't feel bad, and she didn't feel good, about knowing something her father didn't want her to know ever, but she couldn't help thinking about it. Why couldn't they've told me, she kept asking herself. Her mother had told her, if you figured it out. Was that supposed to shut her up? She was shut up, all right. She wasn't ever going to tell them what she knew.

At the first chance, she asked her mother to help her move the piano, and had to tell her she wanted to see if her grandfather's picture was back there. "I promise I won't ask any more questions."

"That'll be the day," her mother said. Then, "It's not there, child. I think your father took it away."

"Did he burn it?"

"You weren't going to ask any more questions."

She shouldn't have promised. The more she tried to fit her mother's story to what she knew, the more questions came up. If her grandfather killed a man, was it so terrible if it was a bad man? The coffin in her mother's story was spooky. Her grandmother Dixon—her step-grandmother: Lainie's father couldn't remember about her, either. And maybe her mother made up that part. She did make up. Her father couldn't remember and her mother couldn't forget. She didn't let herself forget. Her father made himself forget. All those native tribesmen they had to kill in the Philippines, he'd told her once, it wasn't the same in war. It was you or them. When the police came to arrest his father, was that when he ran away? Or was it afterward, when they put Grandfather away? Was Dad ashamed? Scared? Dad, scared? She wasn't scared of Dad, either. Not anymore. She didn't hate him, but she didn't think they were going to have fun together like they used to.

But that Friday night they did have fun, all three of them. They had supper in a Chinese restaurant and went to the village the-

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ater. Micky was left his meal on the kitchen table, and when Lainie's father insisted, was allowed to stay and listen to the radio in the living room. Both Lainie and her mother knew better than to argue over it and spoil their evening. It came pretty close to that when her mother said that Micky had to be told to change out of his work shoes and overalls.

"For God's sake, Margaret, he knows that."

"He didn't do it last time, and I'll not have him traipsing through the house bringing the barn in with him."

Her father muttered that he wouldn't be traipsing through the house, and they got off without a quarrel.

The night was just about perfect, Lainie thought by the time they were headed home. Fred Thomson was her favorite cowboy, and Silver King her dad's favorite horse in the movies. Her mother, with a robe over her legs, sat in the backseat. She always did. She thought any movie was better than none, and she did enjoy the beautiful wild country—the wilds of America.

Lainie asked her father if he would soon let her drive after dark.

"Sh-sh-sh," he said.

"I heard you," her mother said.

Lainie didn't care whether Micky had traipsed or tiptoed, she knew when she got upstairs he'd been in her room. Nothing looked different, but she knew. She could smell him. What good was Jock? The stupid dog probably took him through the house. He'd washed up and put away his dishes, and he'd put the key to the door back in its place on a nail under the step. He'd even remembered to leave the kitchen light on. Saint Micky. The *gobbeen:* She'd bet he didn't even know he was one.

In the morning, Lainie's mother was sick. Something she ate in the restaurant, but Lainie and her father knew from the sounds of her retching it was a bilious attack, something she got every few months. She vomited green bile. Her father said she was getting Ireland out of her system. Her mother said she'd kill him when she got over the attack.

Lainie made breakfast for the men and took her mother half-cups of tea. She never wanted more than a half-cup, and Lainie and her father always humored her, making the full cup and then throwing half of it out before taking it upstairs. Lainie listened to her father on the hall phone try to change his plans for the day. He was supposed to pick up two of his Foreign War comrades and go to the county seat for a meeting that afternoon. It was an important meeting. They all were, Lainie thought. Two of the girls from down the road were supposed to come to supper. Her mother was going to teach them how to play whist. Lainie already knew, but she'd made up her mind not to show off. She wanted to play. But

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not that day. She'd call them when her father finished with the phone. When he hung up Lainie said she didn't see why he couldn't go to his meeting.

"I can take care of Mother," she said, "and she can tell me when to put the beans in the oven."

"I'll build up the fire before I go," he said. "It'll last." It seemed a long time ago that he had burned her grandfather's letter. "And would you give Micky a hand? He can manage the milking, but you might bring in the cows and feed them, and turn them out afterward."

"Sure," Lainie said.

"I'll make it up to you," her father said.

Lainie did her regular chores first. She fed the chickens and gathered the eggs. The days were getting shorter. The hens were laying better, indoors more. The cows had come home by themselves and waited to be let in. She was sure they were all there, but she called out from the door, "C'boss, c'boss . . ." mostly because she liked to hear her own voice carry into the near dark and send back the hint of an echo. You could hardly hear it for the noisy bunch trying to get into the barn.

When Micky came he stood around waiting for her to finish. He'd brought in two buckets, she noticed, along with the five-gallon can and strainer. "You can start," Lainie said. Dad never waited for the last cow to be fed.

"Ain't you going to help me? Your dad said you would."

"He didn't," Lainie said. She could milk and sometimes did when it was just her and her father. But he didn't think it was the right work for a girl, and her mother was dead certain it wasn't.

"You can weigh up and mark the chart for me," Micky said. Lainie's father kept track of how much milk each cow gave each milking.

"Mother's sick," Lainie said. "I'll come back and let the cows out."

"It gets real lonesome here, nobody to talk to," Micky said.

"You got the cows," Lainie said.

"And one bull," he said, and looked up at her with a silly grin as though he was going to squirt milk at her.

Lainie didn't run, but she didn't hang around, either. The bull was quiet, in a pen of his own, and he had a yard pen to himself. Lainie knew what went on there, though she was kept in the house when it happened. As though you couldn't see anything from an attic window. Or feel anything.

Lainie put the beans in the oven and waited to see the dairy light go on before she went back. Jock went with her as far as the barn door. She shut him out. Inside was cat country, and Jock was all dog, as her father said. Lainie released the bolt on the cow door and started the cows on their way out.

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"They know how to go out," Micky said, close behind her. She didn't hear him come with the clop and the plop the cows made.

"You're not supposed to be here," Lainie said, and moved to go around him.

He backed her toward the wall and dodged to block her every move. "Your dad don't need to know."

Lainie screamed at him. She'd butt him if she could get her head down. She slipped when she tried to kick him, and now she could feel the cold, damp masonry at her back, and she knew she was afraid. She fumbled for the whistle, but she'd not taken it from the kitchen hook.

"Don't make me hurt you. I ain't wanting much."

She spat at him but her mouth was dry and there wasn't much spit. In the misty glare of the barn light, she saw the flash of his pocketknife as he clicked open the blade. She saw then, too, the white naked part waiting to get at her. She didn't care if he killed her, he wasn't going to get to her alive. She tried to scream and tightened all her muscles to go at him. He put a hand to her throat and held her head against the wall.

Jock came leaping, scrabbling over the backs of the cows that clogged their door. He hit the floor and sprang up, teeth bare, at Micky. Micky threw up an arm to ward him off, but Jock tore it away and sank his teeth into Micky's face. Micky howled and begged Lainie to call him off. She hesitated. She didn't want to. Micky brought his knife up and then drove it down with all his strength between Jock's shoulders. The dog still wouldn't let go, not till Lainie cried him off: "Down, Jock, down! Please, down," and caught hold of the scruff of his neck. He let go and dropped himself at Lainie's feet.

Micky ran for the far door, twisting his way through the stanchions. Jock tried to get up but he couldn't. Lainie tried to help him, but he growled at her until she stopped trying. He let out a great howl that stampeded the cows, but their rush was outdoors, past Lainie and Jock. She knelt down by him, whimpering herself, swearing, praying—praying for the dog, please God. Her hand and jacket were dark and wet with his blood. She stroked his head and he didn't growl anymore. She brought armfuls of hay from beneath the chute and put it around him. She tried to tuck some underneath him, but she knew from the weight of him and the stillness that he was dead.

"Let me be the one to tell your father," Lainie's mother said. She'd come down in her robe, a roll of toilet paper in her hand to spit into. She fired up the stove and made tea. Over and over she said, "We should've known—I blame myself as much as your father. What do you know of a man that comes in to you off the road?"

"He's gone," Lainie said. She'd heard the truck, and he'd left the

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gate open. Her father would know something was wrong.

Lainie watched from the living room window. Several cars went by and she followed the lights of each one until it passed the driveway. Shouldn't the police be called if he'd stolen the truck? Her mother didn't say no, but she said, "Your father'll be home any minute now." She waited for him in the kitchen, and when he came, Lainie didn't go out there right away. She heard their voices, but not what they said. She felt ashamed, and guilty. She'd never felt anything that hurt so much.

And the first thing her father said when he saw her was, "It's not your fault, Lainie."

"But it is, Dad. It is!"

His face crumpled like an old man's. He went through to the dining room and switched on the desk lamp.

"Don't, Tom," her mother said when he unlocked the gun drawer.

"Dad, he's gone," Lainie said. "He stole the truck and he's gone."

Her father took out the gun, broke it, and rolled the empty chambers.

"Think of Lainie and me," her mother said. "You know what they'll bring up, Tom. It'll all come out."

He sat, the gun in his hand, and looked at it while she railed on.

"All you thought you were hiding won't be hid anymore—and they'll take back your medals and ribbons, and all them foolish things you're so proud of."

"Don't, Mother, please," Lainie said. It was all wrong, what she was saying, turning mean on him.

But he didn't get up and stomp out of the house. He looked at Lainie's mother. "What do you know of my ribbons and medals? What do you know of me, Margaret?"

Her mother put a handful of tissue to her mouth.

"Dad," Lainie said, "I know about my grandfather. I know where he is. I learned it for myself."

He looked at her queerly, and then put the gun back in the drawer.

"Why couldn't you tell me?" Lainie said.

He shook his head a little, confused, maybe.

"Why can't you tell me *why?*"

He didn't say a word.

Her mother was about to say something, to start all over again. Lainie put out her hand to her mother to stop her.

Her father's voice was so low she could hardly hear, but she did.

"I informed on him when he killed a man. I told the police where they could find him, and then I ran away."

He locked the drawer and got to his feet. "I'm going out to the barn now," and to Lainie, "Take care of your mother."

When he'd lit the lantern and gone, her mother said, "He'll be crying his eyes out over that dog. You'd better go out to him, Lainie." ●

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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

A WALK IN THE PARK

by J. M. Taylor

The girl sat in the park, on a bench by herself. Darkness was falling now, and the wind was rising, grey clouds settling into the Sydney skyline. Autumn leaves hurtled to the ground, startling the odd dog-walker hastening home. Parkas and windcheaters were being zipped, cardigans buttoned right to the top. Dogs still wagged and woofed and pawed and peed but even they were mainly in pursuit of dinner now.

The girl smiled as a fat sausage dog led its portly owner to a fence post. Business done, the little dog kicked hind legs at the ground with self-importance, aiming badly. "Now, Sassy," said the old man on the end of the lead. The girl half-snorted in amusement and the little dog heard. It barked loudly, ears pricked, into the shape-shifting darkness. "Now, Sassy," said the old man again, peering nervously.

Sandy eased off the bench and came out from under the trees, halfway across the oval toward him, so he would realise she was no one to be feared, no weirdo hanging round just waiting for a chance to get some kind of grisly thrill.

"Lovely little dog," she said. "I love dogs."

"Ah, she's a good girl," said the old man, relieved and pleased that the ominous shape on the bench had become an attractive young woman. "Cassandra's her name, Sassy for short."

Sandy laughed. "It suits her," she said. And then, liking the coincidence, "My name's Cassandra, too. But everyone calls me Sandy."

This month's "first story" won a first prize of $1,000 in a competition administered by the Queensland Branch of the Australian Fellowship of Writers. Since the contest did not involve publication, this is the story's first appearance in print. The author, unpublished till now, lives in Sydney, where she has been awarded a Mentorship for Children's Writing, funded by the Australian Council for the Arts.

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"Ah, that's because of your hair," said the old man. Beautiful waves of gold she had, he could see them shining even in the dusky light. "Lovely hair, that is. My granddaughter has hair like that."

The dachshund snarled and snapped at a creepy-crawly. "Sassy!" the old man said.

"My friend's dog sniffs out spiders and plays with them," said Sandy. "He lives down in the bush and he's trained her to do it."

They smiled awkwardly at each other, both knowing that the conversation was over, that it was time to be getting home, but neither of them eager to be going there. The dog was the one who gave them no choice. Tired of sniffing Sandy's ankles, she pulled at the lead, whimpering.

"Well, best be going then," said the old man. "See you another time, maybe."

"Yes, I hope so," said Sandy, and she stood watching while he and Sassy threaded their way through a huddle of trees and climbed the slight rise to the footpath.

She knew she ought to go, too, that it was possibly dangerous to be alone like this in the park after dark, but she felt an anxious, urgent pressure to stay just a little while longer. Besides, she must be quite safe, out here in the middle of the oval where she could see the approach of any stranger from all sides. Where was he? Why wasn't he here? She had been waiting for nearly an hour. Surely he would come soon, walking the big retriever, letting it off the lead for a run, calling, "Sandy, Sandy," and then plonking himself down beside her. Perhaps his wife had engineered another fight and he simply couldn't leave. *Felt* he couldn't leave. "Of course I want to be with you," he'd said. "But you don't understand. It's not that simple. She's a bit—a bit unstable, estranged from her family, an unhappy person. She lived virtually in poverty before she married me. She relies on me totally, I'm her whole world. Especially since the baby died. She blames herself."

Fumbling in her backpack, Sandy checked that the phone was on, the battery operating. All in order. She called her message bank, just in case. Nothing. Perhaps there would be a note in her car—that had happened before, when he'd left his mobile at work. She rang for the time. Ten minutes more to wait. Only ten minutes more, she would wait it out; they had agreed, after all, and so many times before he had arrived at the last minute, breathless, panting an apology. And this week was the daylight-savings change; neither of them had remembered it would be dark an hour early. She stood, irresolute, straining her eyes to scope any silhouette on the rise of the hill beyond the little copse.

A hooded figure walked briskly and almost silently on the other side of the hill, keeping to the low side of the path so no human

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shape would show on the crest. One hand clenched a thermos flask.

Down on the oval, Sandy felt fear. She heaved her shoulders, dangled her arms, shook them to relieve the tension. But it didn't dissipate, and now, suddenly, she wanted to go home. Something had happened to stop him coming, she was sure. And now it had got so dark and she had wandered, to greet the old man and Sassy, so far from her usual place that she could no longer see the roof of her car, which she had left unlocked, as per their normal arrangement, in the little cul-de-sac with the two-hour-parking-limit signs which everyone ignored.

On the other side of the hill, the hooded figure crouched, tucking the flask beneath one arm, slinking to all fours. A slow crawl across grass to the gravel began.

Sandy took a deep breath. She wanted to run, flee, hurry as fast as possible back to the safety of her car, be cosy in its unwashed, apple-core-strewn interior with daggy Sunday night radio and the soothing sound of the engine shifting into gear. But she knew it was irrational to imagine that running could save her now; it might rather be her downfall, as any predator would hear her sooner, with little chance of her hearing them. Besides, she could well trip over some creature's burrow or tuft of grass or even an ill-placed rock in the darkness. Instead, walking steadily forward, she slid her hand into her backpack, scrabbling to close her fingers round the shark key ring full of sharp shiny silver keys. The key ring had been a present from him.

The figure squatted at the passenger side of the little red car, waiting for a windy moment. The creaking of the opening door was swallowed by nature's grumbling. Almost slithering now, the person eased into the passenger seat. A hand felt for the light in the car roof, switching it off. The figure climbed into the backseat, holding tight all the while to the flask.

It was very black on the oval now, a cold night with almost no moon and so much cloud that there may as well have been none. Ears alert, sieving noises through the songs of lonely crickets and the wind, eyes mainly on the ground in front but regularly flitting upward to the crouching trees, Sandy thought she heard a car door. She froze. Listened. No engine. But someone could be waiting. Her grandma had warned her many times about men who waited in the back of defenseless girls' cars. Flattening herself against a lone gum, Sandy gripped the shark key ring tightly in her hand. She angled the keys between her fingers and made a fist of steel before striding forward again.

The light disabled now, gloved hands pulled a creased note from a pocket and placed it in the driver's seat. Easy to see as soon as the

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door was opened, even on this gloomy night. Then, the thermos carefully, carefully unscrewed, but the lid left on, only just balancing on the flask. The container set down delicately out of sight. Any untoward movement would dislodge the lid.

Sandy reached the copse and hesitated. It was all in her mind. It must be. Nothing could possibly happen to her now. After all, it wasn't late, not really, no more than seven o'clock or thereabouts. It was just so much later than usual, for her. *I'll sing and run,* she decided. *That will frighten anyone away. And the people in the houses near the cul-de-sac will hear me.* Loudly, slightly off-key, she launched into "Amazing Grace," and jogged slowly through the trees and up the hill. It took her only thirty seconds, maybe a minute, certainly no more, and then she was looking down into the cul-de-sac, her car filling its usual modest space, lights twinkling from the surrounding homes. The wind had died down and you couldn't hear the crickets here. There were domestic sounds of crockery, teenage music wafting out into the night. Sandy slowed to a walk, ceased singing. Really, she must have looked so ridiculous, running like that, *singing,* an eccentric, an escapee from the local nut house. Close to the car now, she stopped. What if a man were hiding in the backseat?

"There are people in those houses right over there," said Sandy loudly. "I don't care what anyone thinks, I'm going to go in, knock on their doors, and get someone to come with me while I get in my car."

As if on cue, the door of the nearest house was flung open and two teenage boys spilt out. "Yeah, yeah, just a minute, Mum, we'll do the washing up, stop nagging, Mum," called one, and Sandy saw the spark of flame, then three pinpoints of light. Smokers. They were so close, just across the road, and although it was wide just here, they must be able to see her, as she could them. She was saved from the embarrassment of knocking on a stranger's door. She took the car door handle firmly and yanked it open, calling out, "Got a spare smoke for me?" although she didn't, had never, wouldn't ever want to smoke.

"Depends what you're offering in exchange," was the quick reply, and so crassly normal and everyday was it that Sandy laughed. Even though the interior light didn't come on. Not even when she leant in and fiddled with the switch.

She was suspicious, then. But things were always going wrong with the car lately. It was just that sort of age, had had just a little too much wear and tear for its workings to be taken for granted any longer.

Still, she waited awhile, standing back now, hand hovering over the doorjamb, body poised for flight should it be needed, while her

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eyes scanned the shadowy darkness of the backseat. There was definitely no one there. But . . . half-despising herself, seeing the cigarettes still winking at her from the back porch, Sandy went to the boot, creaked it open, and found it empty. Well, she'd had to make sure. She'd seen a movie once where the murderer hid in the boot and then ingeniously cut his way into the backseat, thus putting himself in position to slit the victim's throat at the vital minute.

Now that she knew there was nobody in the car, her eyes stopped looking for the large bulk of a person and focused instead on her driver's seat. Though her eyes could only just make out the printing on the paper, she knew whose printing it was straightaway. She held the note up to catch the lightest bits of night.

SORRY, IN A RUSH. CATCH UP LATER, SEE YOU CHEZ NOUS, LOVE R.

So abrupt. He must have been in a frantic hurry. But it sounded as though he'd managed to get away for the night, a rare treat. Sandy swung herself into the driver's seat, locked the doors quickly, fastened her seatbelt, and put the key in the ignition.

The hooded figure had melted away into darkness down the hill as Sandy was climbing up from the copse. Bent over low, hurrying, hands shoved in pockets and windcheater tightly wrapped. Rounding the first corner and straightening into a brisk power walk, an avid exerciser determined to retain fitness through fair weather or foul.

Sandy was cautious in the dark, but even so she hit one of the potholes in the cul-de-sac. Attention from the council was certainly long overdue.

He stretched out in his after-dinner easy chair, absentmindedly fingering his shark key ring. He smiled, remembering the jokes they'd made about cutting their teeth on each other. Infuriating that he couldn't lay his hands on his phone. He must have left it at the office. Still, there'd been a couple of times he hadn't been able to make it before—and he *had* forgotten about daylight savings. And she knew him well; she would realise that was just the sort of thing he might do. Impossible to ring from here. He was sure his wife always checked the itemised account for numbers. Just once, a few months back, he'd risked it and called, and then had to pretend he'd lost the bill for that month, but it wasn't worth trying that again. It had taken so long to get *her* to calm down after last time. She was probably downstairs in the back garden now. Turning the compost for the worms. He hoped it would put her in a good mood. It would have been useful if he could have nipped up to get takeout before she got home, but he was stuck waiting for

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the mobile car mechanic. What was wrong with the blasted car? Hopefully only the battery. Absently, he kept stroking the key ring.

Sandy was on the highway, thinking of how he'd be waiting, so eager to be with her—maybe he'd even made dinner, she certainly hoped so—when she felt a sharp, an excruciating pain in her ankle. She screamed. Before she'd drawn breath to scream again, there was another piercing jab, this time somewhere round her stomach. Then her arm. By the time she'd pulled over—illegally—to the side of the road, her whole body felt as if it were on fire. She writhed and moaned for release, limbs flailing, panting.

Two motorists behind her watched her swerve off the road onto the shoulder, and one woman rang 000. After all, perhaps the driver'd had a heart attack rather than being just another drunk. But you had to be wary of stopping for strangers these days.

The police and ambulance came fast, but not fast enough. There was little they could do to help the victim when they arrived.

The old man was eating tinned spaghetti Bolognese as he watched the news the following evening. He had switched on too late for most of the main story, but he caught the end.

"That's us, Sassy," he said, and he put down his dinner and they both tumbled into the car.

When they got to the police station, a nice police lady took them into a little room and gave the old man a cup of tea and biscuits and Sassy a drink of watery milk. She thanked the old man for coming forward so quickly, and asked him lots of questions.

"Had you seen her before?"

"No, but then maybe I wouldn't have. Young women generally don't go and sit in parks after dark by themselves."

Before he could say any more, Sassy interrupted the interview, barking, running to the closed door and sniffing at the crack between door and floor. "Sassy, quiet!" said the old man.

"Bridget!" called a voice in the corridor. The police lady frowned and apologised, explaining she'd be back as soon as possible. She left the door ajar when she walked out.

The old man saw two policemen come through the doors, a tall, youngish chap between them, pale, dressed in a business suit, mouth slightly open. The murderer? Behind him strode the power walker, looking just like last night. Another witness. Good. The more the merrier. The old man wanted to see the killer of that lovely young woman put behind bars.

He'd finished his cup of tea and all the biscuits by the time a policeman came to him. The policeman explained that Bridget was needed to interview a woman and apologised for starting the interview again. The questions were easy to answer, as before. No,

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he hadn't seen the young lady previously. Yes, he had wondered at her being in the park by herself at such an hour. Without a dog or anything. Well, he had thought perhaps she was waiting for a romantic tryst. She was young, and lovely besides—it stood to reason she would have a man in her life. No, he had left the park before her; how long before he couldn't say, not precisely. He found the grass a little damp for walking on, and only went for Sassy; then it was three times round the block, for his constitutional. It had been the second time round that he had seen that fellow in the hood, that must have been ten minutes after Sassy and he had said goodbye to the girl, so perhaps—

"What fellow?"

"The one who arrived here just now, just behind that chap in the suit. Must have caught the news broadcast, too, I expect."

The policeman looked a bit funny then, said there were just a few more questions. He couldn't be certain, could he, that this was the fellow he'd seen on Sunday night? After all, it was dark, they didn't speak, it was a brief few seconds while they walked past each other.

The old man smiled, pleased. His eyes were sharp as ever, thank the Lord. He recognised the walk, the coat, and the shoes. Especially the shoes. That distinctive stitching . . .

But couldn't they just be any pair of running shoes? the policeman queried. After all, they're a popular enough shoe these days.

Yes, said the old man, perhaps, but the shoes had reflectors on them. Blue, green, and yellow. Two of each on each foot. Except on the left foot, there was only the one blue one. The other must have fallen off somewhere. "I noticed specially; the pattern reminded me of my old school tie," said the old man. "And anyway—the way Sassy barked when they arrived? She recognised that chap." The policeman thanked the old man, asked him to sign his statement, and ushered him out of the station, asking him to call back the next day when, hopefully, there'd be further developments.

The wife remembered seeing the old man with his dog. But she couldn't narrow the time down any further for them. She seemed surprised to learn that the old man had thought she was a bloke. "It's true I wear his jacket when I'm walking to the gym alone, so I look more threatening, but I didn't realise quite how effective a disguise it was."

Her husband noticed that the shiny grey colour of the handcuffs blended in with his suit. He felt quite distant from his body, as though he were standing outside it—someone else's fingers were rolling over the ink pad, making an impression with the ball of each finger inside the requisite squares. It was wrong, all wrong, but it didn't matter now, not just at this moment. It felt like noth-

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ing would ever matter again. He shivered, going over the interview. His wife would call a lawyer. Thank God she'd insisted on coming down here with him. That note, "the" note as they were calling it, yes, it was his writing, he'd written it, he wasn't trying to deny it, he could recognise his own writing. But he hadn't left it in the car.

"Gave it to Sandy in person, did you? Perhaps you wanted to pretend you were strangers, in case your wife got wind of what was going on, so you just walked past and shook hands or something like that? Same way you gave her the coffee flask? Just handed it to her, said, here's something that'll keep you warm while you're waiting? Or did you hide that in the car first? Come on, we've got the note, the fact that you habitually went for a walk before dinner around that time, and your mobile number comes up as the most frequent of her contacts. Why did you do it, huh? Trying to break it off with her and she took it badly? Stalking you, was she? You realised what you had to lose, didn't want the wife to know?"

It was a nightmare. Over and over and over again.

"Seemed like a good way out? Silly of you to leave the note behind, but then, most murderers slip up somewhere."

The policewoman found the suspect's wife to be entirely coherent, despite her obvious distress.

"What about your husband? He always went for a walk about that time?"

"Yes, both days on the weekend."

"And you—you usually went, too?"

"No, you see, he prefers a leisurely saunter with the dog, while I like to exercise properly, if you know what I mean."

The policewoman said that she did.

"Your husband claims he didn't leave the house that night till after eight o'clock."

"That's true, he didn't . . ."

The policewoman pounced on the hesitation.

"But?"

"But he could have gone while I was out. But he wouldn't have, I know my husband, he doesn't lie or cheat or anything, let alone kill someone. He's a good man."

"You'd be surprised," said the policewoman.

"He—he was really angry when the car wouldn't start," said the wife slowly. "The battery was flat, we had to get the mobile mechanic."

All the voices whirring round him made the husband dizzy. But there was something he had to know.

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He raised his head from between his knees. "She—she—how did she die?"

"Isn't he behind the times, now, Al?" The younger policeman slapped his thigh. He was angry. It was easy to see, even from the morbid photos, how young and country-pretty the girl had been. "I'll just read you part of the statement that the attending officers made." He drew a deep breath.

" 'There were a number of Funnel-web spiders inside the victim's car. All those recovered were adult males, the more dangerous sex of the species. They appeared to have been kept in a thermos flask of the kind that would usually hold coffee. The victim was bitten thirteen times. Her airway was obstructed by the presence of a spider in her throat. She was found to have choked to death, having lapsed into unconsciousness.' "

The policeman coughed. "Now, I suppose you thought, well, I'll get there before the ambulance, the cops. I'll get there in time to get the thermos. Maybe you planned to take the dog with you in the car, knowing they're immune to Funnel-web bites. Maybe you planned to have it reconnoitre, fetch the flask for you; it's a retriever, we know how they love to fetch and carry. Just bad luck for you that the car wouldn't start. *That* wasn't part of your plan . . ."

"Funnel webs?" He was staring now, having heard nothing since the police report was read. He knew now how it had been done. She must have known. So slick, so clever. So difficult to prove.

The policewoman tried to keep her witness talking. A wife she might be, but she was also a woman.

"You had no idea he was having an affair with her? It seems to have been of some long standing; a flat, credit cards billed to him, enough phone calls to reverse the ill fortunes of any phone company."

"No, I'd no idea. He worked such long hours, but then executives do. He never forgot me. He was always there when I needed him."

The policewoman pressed harder for cracks in the armour.

"Oh, I don't want to make things worse for him, I really can't believe he's done this terrible thing, but—I've been so unhappy since—since our baby died, it hasn't been the same between us. I was seeing someone else, and I didn't want him to know. I was planning to leave him, and I was scared of what he might do. You'd never know it to look at him, just to meet him, but he's a terribly jealous type."

Later, over drinks, the police shook their heads at the irony of it all. "What a waste. He kills her because he's worried his wife will find out; but the wife's planning to leave him anyway, and *she's* scared about *him* finding out. Christ, maybe she was lucky. Could have been her if she'd got her timing wrong."

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Over a cup of coffee later that night, she went over things in her mind. Overall, so far, it had been a breeze, a walk in the park. And it looked as though all the sweat and blood she'd put into working up the relationship with Frank would be worth it. She was certain that the police would speak with him, confirm their affair, confirm she was with him at the gym that night. She would wait a little while before she made him break it off. She didn't think that would be a problem. Grief could make a person so unattractive. She planned for it to have that effect on her. He wouldn't want to be involved with a needy woman whose husband had been charged with murder. He wouldn't want to be bothered with that. He had too much lifestyle to lose.

As she had. God, Richard had been such a bore lately, as he tried to work himself up to leave her for that stupid girl. Trying to work out how to let her down gently. Giving in to her in everything, watching her, calculating when the time would be right to tell her. Leading her on like that, how dare he! She had been filled with anger, horror, and contempt. Feelings that had been swelling grievously inside her since Eugenia's death. *That* had been entirely his fault; he had insisted on leaving the windows open—open to any creepy-crawly that wanted to come in.

Still, being a single parent had never been part of her plan. Too tiresome entirely. And expensive. She wasn't going back to being poor again. But then, legal fees were horrendous. She would have to act fast, liquefy some assets quickly, move the money around so as to protect her future.

Which reminded her.

Moving to the door, she patted the retriever on the head. "Fetch!" she said, pointing. The dog scratched quickly in the compost heap, and bounded back, tail wagging proudly, with her husband's mobile phone. Amazing what they remembered. But she'd prefer it wasn't ever found. She pulled out the SIM card and put it in her purse. She'd take a trip to Manly tomorrow, lean over the ferry rail like a tourist, feel the phone and then the SIM card slip through her fingers and watch them plop into the harbour.

Now for the last thing. "Spider insider!" she whispered, and the dog growled and raced down the steps. Soon it was pawing and barking. She followed with the poison, pulling on her gardening gloves. She repeated the mantra, raking at the compost, stabbing quickly with her gardening fork, straining her eyes to see the holes in the ground that so excited the dog, till all had been unearthed, inhabitants liquidated. She didn't want to take any risks now. At last she straightened, pulling affectionately at the floppy ears. "Good girl, Sandy," she said. "Dinnertime." ●

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Art by Laurie Harden

HERITAGE TRAIL

by Budge Burgess

"Morning! I want to report a murder."

The young policewoman glanced over her shoulder. The sergeant, writing at a desk, put his pen down and stood up.

"I don't know if it's of interest, though . . ."

The sergeant moved forward, eyes narrowing quizzically.

". . . it happened two hundred and fifty years ago."

Abraham Kirkpatrick studied the letters handed him by his lawyer, Jardine. They documented the decline and fall of his empire around the Scots hamlet of Sanquhar. He reached for his quill.

"Have you heard?" he asked.

The two men before him nodded gravely.

"The prince has landed," replied Jardine. "General Cope is mobilizing troops to oppose the rebels."

One by one, Kirkpatrick signed the documents, then watched Jardine and the doctor, Archibauld, witness his signatures.

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"That leaves only this house and the kirk."

Wilson Jardine collected the contracts. Six farms, a wood, two pastures, the dairy herd, two flocks of sheep, a sawmill, and a smithy were thus delivered from Kirkpatrick's ownership.

"The kirk may be the sticking point," observed Jardine. "I spoke with Sir Gordon Murray's steward. Sir Gordon is interested in the purchase of this house. The kirk, however, is unlikely to be much in demand."

Kirkpatrick rose and walked to the window. Two miles away, across a wooded valley, he could see the tower of the derelict church. Even from such a distance, it reeked of decay.

"McMinn has voiced interest in the land," continued Jardine, "but has no use for the building. Could we but remove the fabric of the kirk, the land would sell."

"A buyer could be found for the materials?"

"Aye, that could be arranged."

"Let it be done. Reach a price with McMinn, a fair one; I'll not have the wretch rob me."

In the event, demolition could not be carried out as readily as it could be instructed. Many regarded as blasphemous the razing of a house of God. If it was closed to worship, only God's hand could open it to the elements and erode its design and purpose.

Others harbored more material suspicion. Kirkpatrick was in rare haste to sell. Gossip said he was deep in debt, could not recompense any who labored for him.

Still others foresaw a pressing danger in aiding him. Prince Charles Edward Stuart was assaying fresh revolt against King George. Thirty years ago, Kirkpatrick's father had opposed the Stuart claim during the rebellion of 1715.

Had not Sheriff Kirkpatrick equipped an infantry company to face these Jacobites? Had he not sat in judgment on rebels, signing the warrants to exile a dozen to the Americas? Had not this noble sheriff benefited from the seizure of Jacobite properties, their stewardship granted him by a grateful king?

Should rebellion prosper, the Jacobites must pass Sanquhar on their way into England. Their ranks would contain men who

Widely published fiction and nonfiction writer Budge Burgess currently writes a monthly column for the U.K.'s leading print magazine for writers, *Writer's News*. The American magazines *Thema* and *Weird Tales* have published his stories, and *EQMM* is pleased to join them in showcasing his work in the U.S. Mr. Burgess's first piece for us is the tale of an American who begins a search for his European roots—and discovers more than he bargained for!

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surely remembered Sheriff Kirkpatrick, who might yet have scores to settle with his son.

But there was one final school of philosophy. Some held that Kirkpatrick was pleasuring a married lady and feared discovery. He was a wild man with fist or cudgel, but ill-lared in the gentlemanly arts of dueling.

Thus it was that Kirkpatrick found himself, six weeks later, dismantling the kirk with his own hands, aided by the coarse assistance of two threadbare tinkers.

For eight days he labored, stripping slate, removing roof beams, recovering stonework. Eight long days of hard toil, neglecting even to honor the Sabbath.

Many tongues wagged at such irreverence. Kirkpatrick must be arraigned before the presbytery court! But who would testify? Kirkpatrick's ire was famed. Better leave judgment to the Lord than risk Kirkpatrick's earthly retribution.

On the ninth day, the heavens opened. Dense, brimstone clouds cloaked the valley as the solitary Kirkpatrick mounted a ladder, again and again, defying the elements. By midafternoon his movements slowed. Waterlogged, forlorn, and exhausted, he finally abandoned his endeavors.

James Robb, the carter, saw him leave. Saw him mount his horse, a skittish mare, recently purchased at market. Saw Kirkpatrick spur the beast into action. Robb doffed his bonnet as the landowner galloped past. His salutation was rewarded by a curt growl.

Charles Kirkpatrick, of Plymouth, North Carolina, sat in an interview room at Dumfries police station. Across the table, the young detective flipped open his notebook.

"I gather you're reporting a two-hundred-and-fifty-year-old murder?"

"I am."

"I've never dealt with anything like this." The policeman smiled. "I'll need a statement in due course, but can you start by explaining how you came across the suspicious death?"

"I learned about it from documents left by my ancestor, Abraham Kirkpatrick of Sanquhar. They've been handed down the generations, kept in a sea chest till my granddad decided to research our family history. When Granddad died, Grandma asked me to take over as family historian. It took time! Granddad was a devout fisherman, but when it came to paperwork, he was an atheist."

"Bit of a shambles, eh?"

"And some. When I finally worked out his misfiling system, I started with the earliest documents. Soon it became obvious there was something about Abraham Kirkpatrick."

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Precisely where Kirkpatrick fell from his horse was never established. The road from kirk to house wound some three miles. Perchance a lightning flash frighted the animal, causing it to unseat the fatigued rider.

The body was not found quickly. Kirkpatrick had discharged his servants, save one Molly Brown, who called daily to clean, prepare meals, and light the fire. She it was who discovered the horse grazing before the house, Kirkpatrick's boot and stocking caught fast in a stirrup.

It was late next day before the body was recovered, fallen in a roadside ditch, entombed 'neath overhanging foliage.

Those who saw the cadaver pronounced it unrecognizable. Even Dr. Archibauld, childhood intimate of the dead man, and his physician these twenty years, could identify him only by his clothing. Face and head were a bloodied mass, having been dragged along that unforgiving road, then visited by crows, a fox, and other vermin.

Jardine wound up Kirkpatrick's affairs. The sale of house and kirklands was undertaken. With no family, his testament named as beneficiary a lawyer, McConnell, in Massachusetts.

It would be misleading to claim Kirkpatrick was mourned. A handful attended his funeral. Fewer showed remorse. News his affairs had been settled in favor of an American lawyer was grist to the gossip mill.

Kirkpatrick, it was held, had been conducting an affair with a lady. Were there not two candidates? (Politeness kept any from broadcasting their names.) Their husbands were serving with the king's armies. Might not one, enduring the tedium of country life, have contrived solace in male attention?

Had Kirkpatrick liquidized his affairs in order to flee with his mistress to the colonies? This seemed an incontrovertible conclusion given the disposition of his will.

Interest might have died with Kirkpatrick. Affairs of state eclipsed parochial scandal. The day of his death, the prince triumphed at Prestonpans. His army must now advance.

In Sanquhar, uncertainty gripped the populace. One or two headed north to join the rebels. Others, vocal supporters of King George, boarded up their homes and took the road south to relative safety in England.

But Kirkpatrick would not allow tongues to rest. Ten evenings after the funeral, the tanner, Watret, was making for home. Watret, a man of ruddy complexion, fiery hair, but sober disposition, saw Kirkpatrick in the kirkyard.

He recognized the dead landowner clearly. The specter stood astride his grave, beckoning with a gaunt, urgent hand.

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Watret, a famous abstainer, took refuge in The Drover's Arms tavern. Many remarked on his snowy pallor and white hair.

Thereafter, several respectable citizens saw the ghost. All described the same tableau. Kirkpatrick stood at his stone, face bloody, hand beckoning. Though he wished to impart some grave secret, none would venture near to learn the tale.

"The man who carried my name to America died in Scotland!"

"So you suspect Abraham was the victim of foul play?" asked the detective.

"There were several documents in the sea chest which fed my suspicions. Then I discovered McConnell's papers, preserved by a local historical society. After seeing them, I couldn't accept that Abraham died on that road."

"His body was identified."

"The body was recognizable only by its clothing. I spent a couple of years researching the death. I corresponded with several historians and archivists."

Charles shuffled his notes and produced a photocopy.

"Last week I went to Edinburgh, talked with Michael Simpson at the National Library. He's made some crucial discoveries. Abraham Kirkpatrick employed two tinkers at the church. A week after the body was found, a complaint was lodged by Jessie Smith." Charles tapped the photocopy. "Her husband, Rab, was one of the tinkers. She claimed Rab disappeared the day Abraham met his death. The more I looked into it, the more I became convinced the body was Rab's."

For weeks Kirkpatrick's ghost terrorized Sanquhar. Many rehearsed ways and means to banish the specter. There was universal agreement on one matter. The day Watret espied it, the Widow Kerr was laid to rest. Her husband had died two years earlier, leaving her in penury. Her son abandoned her to go in search of fortune. The widow, still far from plain by many an account, pined away.

Had not Kirkpatrick evicted her and forced her into a tiny cottage? Had he not failed to extend the charity befitting a poor widow? Was he not responsible for her death, deserted by all save her husband's physician?

Archibauld found her, cold in bed. Though he concluded her heart had seized with grief, some complained she had taken her own life, so must be refused burial within hallowed ground.

Archibauld commissioned a coffin, but laid out the body himself, anxious none should discern marks of self-destruction and deprive her of Christian burial. Archibauld generously ensured she would

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not be denied a place alongside her husband.

Had her burial woken Kirkpatrick? Surely she had just cause to haunt her abuser and drive the abomination to the surface?

Finally, it was agreed that Reverend Pattinson would visit the kirkyard to exorcise the specter. Three nights, Pattinson dwelt within the kirkyard. Three long, frustrating, fruitless nights. Kirkpatrick made no show.

For a spell it seemed the clergyman had appeased the ghost. Then the apparition returned. This time, Archibauld came forward. Abraham's closest friend since childhood, none knew the deceased man better nor loved him more. Kirkpatrick did not seek pardon. He had unfinished business. If any could learn it and release the spirit, Archibauld could.

The doctor, however, was a man of science, unwilling to hazard himself without precaution. On the allotted night, he took himself to the kirkyard accoutred with a pair of pistols, his seafaring father's cutlass, and the family Bible.

Archibauld's departure was observed by his wife and child, but no spectator attended the kirkyard to witness his visit.

What transpired, none could say. Of Kirkpatrick, no more was heard. Whether the power of iron and Good Book convinced the specter to depart, or whether the doctor's words charmed the dead man, none knew. Archibauld was never seen again.

Search for him was in vain. Hope of explanation vanished when Jacobite pickets rode up. They paid scant attention to the hamlet, save to break into Jardine's house and carry him off. Jardine, it appeared, would pay the penalty for diligent management of Kirkpatrick's affairs.

"So it's Archibauld? His is the 'suspicious death'?"

"Maybe."

The policeman sighed and cast a despairing glance at the ceiling. "You're going to tell me it gets more complicated?"

"I found papers from a variety of sources: letters, a journal, legal documents, business accounts, bits and pieces that made little sense on their own but helped build a picture. There were gaps, of course, too difficult to fill from the wrong side of the Atlantic and two hundred and fifty years' distance. I had to throw back a lot of red herrings. It wasn't until I arrived here that I got close to the truth."

The Jacobites passed by and pressed on into England, intent on bringing King George's army to battle. Sanquhar awaited the outcome of history. Lacking leadership of the wit and decision of a Kirkpatrick, no opposition was mustered.

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By December, the tide of rebellion had passed high-water mark. The exhausted rebels returned north, pausing briefly to demand food and shoes.

By spring, their cause was lost. Dead lay on the blighted moor of Culloden, casualties in an ill-judged battle or rudely butchered in flight. The prince was hunted, his supporters captured. As brutal discipline was restored to Scotland, few speculated on the whereabouts of Archibauld or Jardine.

In that climate, disappearance was self-incriminating; it surely spoke of Jacobite sympathy and flight from punishment? No trace of either man was ever found.

"Were many records lost in the rebellion?" The detective stopped taking notes and leaned on the table.

"Professional soldiers kept accounts. There's no evidence they killed Jardine. There's no mention of him at all."

"So, we've a couple of missing persons and suspicion about Kirkpatrick's death?"

"Three missing persons. Jardine, Archibauld, and Smith. Four, if you count Abraham. And maybe a fifth."

"The other tinker?"

"No. He was an itinerant laborer. Abraham was a demanding employer. Smith's widow confirmed they were paid the night before the death. Smith swore he was going to finish the job, but his buddy took the money and left."

"So who's the fifth man?"

"I discovered that when I deciphered the journal."

The arrival of the ship *Philadelphia* at Boston in June, 1746, was recorded by a clerk, Josiah Hellier. Its passengers included "Mr. & Mrs. Abraham Kirkpatrick, of Bristol, England."

Abraham was relieved to be delivered safe ashore. Several times during his first sea voyage he became convinced he must die.

His wife fared better. Janet proved a robust traveler who endured cramped passage without complaint. Nothing could distract her from dreams of a new life in the New World.

As Abraham oversaw the unloading of their possessions, two figures approached. Janet rushed to embrace the younger man while the elder engaged Abraham.

"I have the honor of addressing Abraham Kirkpatrick?"

"Indeed."

"Hugh McConnell, notary, at your service, sir. Welcome to Massachusetts."

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Detective Constable John Gibson settled into a seat in The Globe and sipped his coffee. Charles spread papers on the pub table, pausing to enjoy a mouthful of lager.

"Good idea, Officer. This is much more civilized."

"John. John Gibson."

"Pleased to meet you, John."

They laughed.

"You were talking about a journal?"

"I found one in the sea chest, dating from the seventeen forties, written by a lady, an educated lady."

"And that gave you the next clue you were looking for?"

"Not immediately. She wrote in code, and in French, to guarantee privacy. I don't speak French, so I concentrated on easier documents and hired a bilingual secretary."

He paused while a waitress delivered their meals.

"Anyhow, the secretary took awhile to get into the journal. She had to break the code as well as translate eighteenth-century French. Not what she's used to, you understand. Anyhow, she got involved."

"I can appreciate that."

"She finally produced a typed translation. Beautiful. Answered a lot of questions."

Abraham Kirkpatrick and his wife remained in Boston for a week, guests of Hugh McConnell. It took Abraham time to recover from memories of wind-buffeted sails, salt spray, the constant motion of the fragile vessel. He made solemn covenant with himself that he should never again put to sea.

The hospitality of the McConnells was beyond reproach. But, if Abraham was fit, McConnell had difficulty persuading him to undertake further travel.

"I assure you, Abraham, there shall be no hazard in taking ship again. Your route will not carry you into deep ocean. It is the only safe passage. To assay a journey overland to the Carolinas is out of the question."

Abraham resisted, but his wife convinced him. McConnell secured them passage on a coastal vessel, its captain engaged to safely discharge his passengers at Norfolk, Virginia.

Janet and the other member of their party, Walter, spent time on deck, admiring the views and benefiting from the sea air. Abraham held to his cabin, taciturn, tormented, unable to eat.

Once on Virginia soil, their new patron, a Mr. Dunn, offered hospitality while he hired carriage and driver to take them into the

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Carolinas, where the Kirkpatricks would discover their new home, in the hamlet of Edenton.

"The author of the journal identified herself as JK. But there's no evidence Abraham and the woman who called herself Janet Kirkpatrick had married. I assume this was some convenience they adopted for the New World."

"She was one of the 'ladies' the gossips talked about?"

"No. I uncovered a lot of background information from the period, notes and letters passing on gossip. A couple alluded to Kirkpatrick's supposed affair with a lady. Try as I might, I couldn't find her. Of the two obvious candidates, neither was called Janet, neither left Scotland."

"So, there was somebody else, somebody the gossips missed?"

"The journal writer came to Boston as Janet Kirkpatrick. She was buried as Janet Kirkpatrick, shared a grave with her 'husband,' Abraham. Janet Kirkpatrick was no illusion. She was real."

"Only we don't know who she was before Janet Kirkpatrick."

"Precisely. Then a thought struck me. I asked Maria, the bilingual secretary, to take another look at the journal. My intentions weren't exactly honorable, I was looking for an excuse to see her again."

The detective grinned.

"Anyhow, we reviewed the journal and realized Janet had left misleading clues. Her coded inventions and not always perfect French left scope for mistranslation, particularly by a conscientious secretary used to tidying up business grammar."

"Maria made mistakes in translation?"

"She corrected what she saw as mistakes. I asked for a literal translation of one entry, from seventeen forty-three. It read, 'AK gone today. I do not know what shall become of me.' Maria assumed Abraham had simply gone off, leaving Janet missing him. But in Scotland, 'gone' means 'died.' Well, Abraham didn't die in seventeen forty-three . . . hell, we've doubts he died in seventeen forty-five!"

"So AK isn't Abraham Kirkpatrick?"

"It's Adam Kerr! He died in seventeen forty-three, survived by a wife, Janet, and son, Walter, born seventeen twenty-five."

"We're back to Archibauld. He identified Abraham's body. He pronounced Janet Kerr dead. He meets with the ghost, then disappears. What was Archibauld up to?"

The Kirkpatricks settled into their new home and were made generously welcome by local families of Scots descent. They found themselves busy passing on such news and histories as they could recall.

Walter was already established in the colony. A man of infinite

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energy and drive, he had, despite his youth, built up a thriving trade as a timber merchant, while apprenticing himself to a local veterinarian.

Many wondered when Walter took time to rest. He avowed a simple philosophy. When his father should come to America, he would require a business of his own. Walter aspired to a profession which would ensure his own livelihood when his father took charge of the timber trade, for surely it would be foolhardy to assume there could be harmonious place for two Kirkpatricks at the head of one small business?

"I couldn't figure what happened to the good doctor till I confirmed that Walter was Abraham's son. After Kerr's death, Walter went to America, to be met by Hugh McConnell. McConnell refers to him as 'Kirkpatrick,' never 'Kerr.' Walter himself never used any other surname in America."

"So Abraham was his father?"

"Definitely. Adam Kerr was forty-eight when he married Janet. She delivered the child six months later. Kerr was a gentleman farmer. Not a successful one. He was indebted to the sheriff, but Abraham showed little sympathy; he had no hesitation foreclosing the mortgage and evicting the widow."

"Leaving the doctor her only friend?"

"Apparently."

"You're sure the doctor wasn't Walter's father?"

"Sure. When I started trying to figure out who his father was, I concentrated on events around the time of the Jacobite rebellion. Only I picked the wrong rebellion."

The room was hung with mementos of the uprising: stands of muskets decorated the walls, flanking the Union flag carried by Sheriff Kirkpatrick's company in that conflict. Young Wilson Jardine did not relish his task, especially in a room so instrumentally dedicated to violence. However, he accepted responsibility. Presently the sheriff entered.

Kirkpatrick was not renowned for sentimentality and had little obvious affection for anyone. But Sheriff Kirkpatrick was much given to secrecy.

Hector Archibauld was his sole friend. When the captain was at sea, the sheriff carried on gruff discourse with few, concerning himself with disciplining his son. While the boy's mother yet lived, she proved a restraining influence. After her death, Abraham discovered a wilder spirit.

Abraham and Robbie, Captain Archibauld's son, were of an age

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and shared a passion for the ladies and the barleycorn. Now in their mid twenties, their time was nearing for marriage.

The sheriff chose suitable matches, girls of respectable status who would confer advantage. Girls, moreover, who possessed the strength of character to discipline wild spirits to the mature pursuits of business.

And now Jardine, his clerk, stood before him, eyes downcast.

"Spit it out, damn you, Jardine. I ken you well enough to foresee storm clouds in your visage."

"Janet Thompson, Your Honor. The schoolteacher's girl."

The sheriff could imagine. "How old?"

"But nineteen."

"And?"

"With master Abraham's child."

Though none of the laws of Scotland instructed action in such cases, even a sheriff's clerk, apprenticed to the legal profession, understood there were but two options. Dispatch the girl to distant relatives or find a surrogate husband.

The sheriff stared at his clerk. "Well, Jardine, you have a practical mind. Have you a ready solution?"

"Your Honor, she yet has seven months of confinement and will not show for some time. She is a comely girl, intelligent, pleasant-natured, and, though her family are of below the middling sort, her parents have provided her with a thorough education. She will make a match for a farming bachelor of your acquaintance."

"Kerr? He's old enough to be her father."

"He is willing."

"He has been instructed in her condition?"

"His debt to you and love of your family is such that he would regard it as a privilege to marry the girl and recognize the child as his."

"Make the arrangements."

When Abraham heard the Thompson girl would wed Kerr, he flew into a rage, protesting his love, insisting he would have the child known as his!

But Abraham could not long resist his father. Cut off, penniless, he could not maintain his young bride. Kerr would provide, explained the sheriff. With a clever young woman to guide him, Kerr might prosper, enough to clear his debts and reward her with some comforts.

For the sole occasion in his life, the sheriff compromised. Kerr would wed the girl, Abraham would remain a bachelor, but would go to sea to learn the shipping trade betwixt Scotland and Bristol. Robbie, meanwhile, would accept his chosen bride and no longer distract Abraham.

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"How does Archibauld fit in?" John finished his coffee.

"Consider the matter of debt. People were indebted to the Kirkpatricks. Father and son were canny Scots businessmen. But there are many varieties of debt. The journal wasn't the only thing in French. I found coded letters from France!"

John sat back, lost to the significance of this.

"John, where did the prince return after the 'forty-five rebellion failed?"

"To France!"

"Exactly. England was at war with France for most of the eighteenth century. So why did a Scottish sheriff get letters from an enemy power?"

"He was a spy?"

"A double agent. He knew of the uprising in seventeen fifteen. Abraham was warned again in seventeen forty-five. That's why he sold everything."

John nodded. "He was worried this new rebellion might stir up memories, that someone would inform."

"His father sent people into exile, people who might've been hanged otherwise. He protected them. He and his son managed their properties for thirty years . . ."

". . . and sent money to America, to McConnell."

"When the Kirkpatricks got to Carolina, they found exiled Scots who owed their lives and livelihoods to the sheriff."

"So Kirkpatrick stages his own death, murders the tinker, switches clothes, then goes into hiding?"

"The answer lies in this report by a Jacobite officer." Charles shuffled another photocopy to the top of the pile.

Major Donald MacDonald fought in French service against the English, but resigned his commission to serve the prince. He transformed excitable volunteers into disciplined soldiers who could, with legitimacy, be described as "dragoons," capable of diligently gathering information for the army.

The major was now charged with escorting the sheriff's son into the presence of the prince. The sheriff's intelligence in 1715 had been much appreciated by the prince's father, but, until now, it had been impossible to reward the family.

Major MacDonald understood the sensitive nature of his task. Though he must trust in the righteousness of his cause, and believe in victory, there were no certainties in warfare. If Kirkpatrick was to be rewarded by an audience with the prince, he must not be compromised, lest King George triumph.

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Major MacDonald's troop circled Sanquhar, ascertaining it concealed no government troops nor armed militia. MacDonald divested himself of his uniform and weapons, and rode up to a farmstead outside of town, guised as a traveler on business.

"Abraham Kirkpatrick, sir?" The rustic shook his head. "Indeed you are too late. Mr. Kirkpatrick has died these several weeks. Died and buried, sir. Died and buried."

The best MacDonald could learn was that the lawyer, Jardine, was charged with Kirkpatrick's business. The farmer gave careful direction to Jardine's house.

MacDonald continued into town, acknowledging the stares which were ever the reward of a stranger. He knocked on the lawyer's door, as if on commercial business. Though he had no reason to assume welcome, once admitted, he did not delay in advertising the purpose of his visit.

"I, sir, am Major Donald MacDonald. I bear a commission from His Majesty, Prince Charles Edward Stuart, rightful heir to the throne. I seek news of Abraham Kirkpatrick."

The other man considered the soldier. He had studied him from the concealment of a window. The major wore civilian garb and carried no arms, but his lean, haunted look was not acquired dancing the gavotte. That he had chosen to admit the man indicated he had devised the soldier's purpose. He had been expecting such a visit.

"Sir, your commission has met with success. I am Abraham Kirkpatrick. I have been awaiting the prince's summons."

"Then pray, sir, why was I informed of your death?"

"A subterfuge, Major. An attempt was made upon my life. I escaped and have been in hiding."

"If, sir, an attempt has been made against you, rest assured I have the means to apprehend the culprit."

"Your assistance will not be required. I have no further fear of my attacker."

MacDonald returned to his troop. Subterfuge was no longer appropriate. A demonstration of force must be the best way to conceal his true intent and ensure that Kirkpatrick was anonymously delivered from concealment.

So it was that the major's dragoons broke down Jardine's door and made great show of carrying off a man covered in a woolen blanket and trussed with rope.

Once clear of town, Kirkpatrick's bindings were removed. Major MacDonald was concerned by the attempt on his life.

"You are certain murder was planned?" inquired the major.

"Certain sure. I learned of it from a laboring man, McGhie, a man inclined to a love of whisky and a loathing of work, who served me in the demolition of a disused church. He and another tinker were hired to assassinate me. McGhie warned me of the ambuscade. I

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rewarded the wretch with a guinea and sent him away."

"You evaded the assault?"

"No, Major, forewarned is forearmed. I knew two men lay in wait for me, so armed myself with a brace of pistols."

"You disposed of your attackers?"

"There was but one. As I rode through the rain, I espied him, standing in the road as if he must talk with me. He was tight wrapped in a ragged cloak, sheltering from the weather. I did not wait to discover what weapon he might have concealed, but discharged my pistol into his face. That was my intent. Had I but more experience in such violence I may have perceived a problem."

"Your pistol failed to discharge?"

"Indeed. The rain had soaked the powder. The villain was struck motionless when I aimed, but recovered when threat passed. He made attempt to pull me from my horse. Still having the pistol in my hand, I used it brutally, striking him about the face and head, raining blows upon him until he subsided."

The two men returned to the police station.

"Kirkpatrick sought refuge with Jardine and remained hidden while he waited for the Jacobite army," continued Charles.

"MacDonald doesn't mention what happened to Jardine?"

"The only person in the house was Abraham, or someone claiming to be Abraham."

"No one reported Jardine missing?"

"Not until the shrouded figure was taken from the house. Everyone assumed it was Jardine."

"So was it Jardine or Kirkpatrick?"

"I didn't know. There was still the doctor. His disappearance kept nagging at me."

"You think he was the one claiming to be Kirkpatrick?"

"Two men had intimate knowledge of Kirkpatrick's affairs. Archibauld was a lifelong friend."

"And Jardine knew Kirkpatrick's business inside out."

"All three were the same age, give or take a year. Nobody on the Jacobite side would recognize the real Kirkpatrick. All contact with him was by letter."

"And it's not that difficult to forge a signature."

"Exactly. Nobody in America would recognize Kirkpatrick, either . . . except Walter, who was clearly in on it."

"So what happened to the man the dragoons led away?"

"MacDonald delivered his charge to the prince. What transpired then, we've no record. Kirkpatrick met the prince, then disappeared. Somehow, he made his way hundreds of miles to Bristol, then Boston."

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"Was Janet waiting in Bristol, or with the prince?"

"I don't know. It's guesswork. When we dig up the body, that's as much as we'll ever know. But there's another clue in Janet's journal."

After Adam's (AK's) death, Janet had little to occupy her, save writing in her journal. She described the secluded cottage. Her "true husband" (TH) called, clandestinely. Her only other visitor was her "constant admirer" (CA).

She described how, as a young woman, when she first met TH, he was accompanied by CA. They were inseparable. Janet was collecting rosehips. CA engaged her in conversation. Janet, however, was smitten by TH. While she endeavored to convey her interest, it was CA who sought greater intimacy.

So it was for several weeks. However Janet contrived to meet TH, CA was ever present, and ever more urgent in his demonstrations of affection.

Quite when, where, and how her relationship with TH was consummated, Janet never wrote. The modesty of a young woman, even a woman in love, would not permit that.

But, long after her swollen belly attested to her congress with TH, CA remained her slave. His attachment was unspoken, but, as her child grew to manhood, Janet remained certain of his affections. Not so TH. The years robbed him of the ability to express emotion, and he embraced a commitment to bachelorhood.

Nevertheless, isolated in her cottage, she recorded cryptic plans. She wrote of her imminent removal to rejoin her son, of TH's express hopes they should, at last, live together as a family.

In her journal, too, she spoke of her sole confidant during this time, her loyal CA.

Charles and the detective returned to the interview room.

"It took Maria and me some time to break Janet's code, but we finally developed a pretty shrewd insight into Janet's mind."

"So it was all a ruse? Kirkpatrick only pretended to evict the widow and mistreat her?"

"Yup. He moved her to a secluded cottage where they could be together, unseen. Kirkpatrick sold up, raising the cash to leave and start afresh. He was worried he'd be compromised by the Jacobites. Abraham, himself, had supported families the sheriff exiled in seventeen fifteen. He risked imprisonment, probably even the gallows."

"So, the love nest was only there while he raised cash?"

"He appears a cold, emotionless man, but that concealed his love for Janet. He fell in love with her and never stopped. His father made sure they couldn't be together, but once Kerr died, there was

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nothing to stop them except fear his Jacobite sympathies might be exposed."

"Archibauld knew?"

"Must've done. They were brothers in everything but blood."

"And Archibauld loved Janet?"

"Archibauld colluded in the plot. He knew what they were planning, but couldn't bear to lose her, so hired the tinkers to kill Kirkpatrick. Probably arranged to visit Janet while the attack took place. He'd pose as an innocent friend, the only one she could turn to."

"Leaving him the one to go to America?"

"Exactly."

"But Kirkpatrick survives."

"Does he? We don't know who the major was talking to."

"You've an idea, though, haven't you? You came to report a murder. There are more pieces to this jigsaw and you've got one of them."

"Not one I can be certain about. There was a note in the sea chest, written very shakily in Kirkpatrick's hand. Some words, some meaningless scribbles, gaps, blots, words crossed out. Maybe some attempt at confession."

The man who had come to the New World as Abraham Kirkpatrick knew he was dying. He called for paper to pen a last few letters to friends, thanking them for their kindnesses, only to discover he no longer had the wit or strength to write. Instead, he scratched at the paper.

"Lord have mercy . . . dead . . . knife. No hope. Justice for traitor. I never betrayed . . . return name . . . scratched on wall . . . give ghost home . . . name . . . justice . . . be the judge."

His wife found him sleeping. Though he lived another day, he never woke.

Next morning, Charles knocked at the door of Jardine's house, much changed in 250 years. Its owner was a sprightly eighty-year-old by the name of Elspeth McPhee.

"Morning, Mrs. McPhee, thanks for letting me trouble you again. I've brought Detective Constable Gibson to see your garden wall."

Elspeth led them through the house. "Has he been telling you his stories, Mr. Gibson?"

The garden was enclosed by an ancient wall, hidden by dense shrubbery and a decrepit garden shed. Charles moved to a lush laurel bush and parted its waxy leaves.

"It took some time to find this." He ran his fingers across the weathered stone. "Here. Initials scratched in the wall."

Charles pressed a sheet of paper to the stone and rubbed with a

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pencil. "I hope this works."

Barely discernible on the paper were two letters.

AK

"Abraham Kirkpatrick?" suggested the detective.

"I believe so," said Charles.

John Gibson pushed the paperwork through. The Procurator Fiscal had to be informed and permission obtained to exhume the body. The county archaeologist was present, together with a doctor and other officials. As police officers chopped back the laurel, Charles tried to second-guess the outcome.

"Kirkpatrick was fatally wounded in the ambush. Smith stabbed him. He went to Jardine for help. Jardine was party to Abraham's plans to flee with Janet. He was probably going to follow."

"Kirkpatrick died, Jardine buried him here." John watched the diggers.

"Not before he ensured a body was left on the road. Jardine dressed the tinker to look like Abraham. If Archibauld made a fuss, he'd incriminate himself. Conspiracy to commit murder, exposure as a Jacobite sympathizer. Archibauld must've been out of his wits."

"So, Jardine played the ghost?"

"I reckon so. He persuaded the doctor to arrange Janet's disappearance, then put on that display to frighten Archibauld even more. I'm not surprised Archibauld disappeared."

"So Jardine's the loyal servant to the end. Takes Janet to America to join her son . . ."

"Found something, sir."

One of the diggers signaled. They peered in the hole. A dark-stained object was visible. A long bone. They watched as the skeleton was carefully exposed.

"Judging by the brow ridges, pelvis, and long bones, it's male." The presiding doctor shook his head. "Been in the ground a century or more, but that's all I can say for now."

"Rest in peace, Abraham," said Charles.

"Sir!" One of the diggers, uncovering the skeleton's toes, was pointing animatedly. Hard against Abraham's feet, another shape was emerging. Another long bone. Another skeleton.

They made further discoveries. Buried with the second body were rusted objects. The county archaeologist joined in.

"Very interesting," she announced. "A pair of flintlock pistols and a cutlass."

"Of course!" Charles shouted. "AK! On the wall. Not Abraham Kirkpatrick . . ."

". . . but Archibauld and Kirkpatrick," confirmed John. "The good servant buried his master, then laid a dog at his feet."

Charles nodded. "Rest in peace, Wilson Jardine. Rest in peace." ●

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THE DEVIL THAT WALKS AT NOONDAY

by Ralph McInerny

Though he is the author of a dozen mainstream novels, Ralph McInerny has made his greatest mark in the mystery genre. Twenty-five years ago he introduced us to Father Dowling, and the series is still going strong. Last month, Minotaur published *Prodigal Father: A Father Dowling Mystery.* One of the author's familiar themes appears in this new story: punishment the law can mete out versus the culprit's confrontation with his inner self. †

After they had pumped his stomach in Emergency a rumpled, whiskery figure pushed aside the curtain and came into the alcove. Earl Green looked at him with the expression of one who had just come back from the dead. The man smelled of cigarettes and needed a shower.

"Mr. Green."

He nodded. The man opened and closed his wallet. "Rankin. You're lucky to be alive."

"Who isn't?"

"Why did you take poison?"

"Poison? It must have been something I ate."

"Like an arsenic sandwich?"

"Arsenic!"

Rankin nodded. "How did you get to the hospital?"

"I was having lunch. I collapsed. Someone must have made a call."

"Where were you having lunch?"

The memories might have been ancient, not just hours ago. Earl recalled the prelude to his being rushed to the hospital by paramedics but it all seemed so long ago.

"They start working on you in the ambulance?"

"I guess so."

"That's why you got here alive."

"You're not serious about the arsenic, are you?"

Rankin nodded and the smell of cigarettes and sweat was strong.

"That's why I'm here. There are two possibilities. Either you tried to commit suicide and thought better of it. Or someone

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wants to get rid of you."

"But I have no enemies."

"So it was suicide."

"No." Earl hesitated. "It's against my religion."

"It's against the law, too, but people do it all the time."

"I didn't commit suicide and no one wants to kill me."

"Tell me about lunch again."

Earl belonged to the brown-bag set at the office where he worked, occupying a middle position and perfectly content with it. He did not want anyone reporting to him and he felt no resentment when young people clambered past him up the corporate ladder. Every year there was a fresh supply of ambitious young people, the women as ambitious as the men, and Earl watched their single-minded drive to excel, be noticed, be promoted. In a year or two they disappeared from sight and he sometimes wondered what happened to them. There were lateral moves, of course, and a very few rose to real authority, but by and large they were used up and let go, burnt out or urged to look elsewhere. Loyalty was nonexistent since every year there was another platoon of new employees in their dark suits and expensive ties and hungry looks. Earl's initial decision to resign from the rat race had not been philosophical. He had been influenced by two coworkers, Pence as an example, Martha as a confidante.

Pence was an older man whose serenity was noteworthy in the fast-paced firm. He had a corner office, he worked minimally but efficiently at his job, and lived for retirement. At first Earl was repelled by such deliberate mediocrity, then he became fascinated. One day he brought his lunch in a brown bag and looked into Pence's office at noon.

"Mind if I join you?"

"Pull up a pew," Pence said, closing his book.

"If you'd rather read . . ."

"Books are always waiting for us when we want them."

Earl tried to read the title of the book and Pence noticed. He held it up. "Henry James. *The American.* Do you know it?"

Earl felt almost ashamed when he said he did not.

"Then a great pleasure lies ahead of you."

Martha joined them, sitting primly on a straight-back chair with her open plastic lunch bucket on her lap. Pence assumed they knew each other, which they did not, but neither corrected the older man. Pence was talking about Henry James in a conversational tone, not a lecture, just speaking of an author he obviously loved and knew well. Earl's thoughts went back to high school assignments, but reading was obviously not a chore to Spence. But what most struck Earl Green was the fact that Pence had carved out a place for himself, more or less defined his own relationship to the firm, and was allowed to exist there on his own terms. At

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first it seemed lack of ambition; then it seemed the steady pursuit of a goal that had little to do with the boring tasks of the office.

"Is he married?" he asked Martha.

"Oh yes. But his children are grown. He likes to say that they make far more money than he does."

Gradually Earl and Martha realized that they too wished to live as Pence did. Earl decided that it was merely a matter of having a different ambition, not having none at all. Those who seemed to be giving everything to the firm were really only working for themselves, so maybe his was not all that different an ambition after all. Pence's notion that his employment did not require that he deliver himself over body and soul to the work that occupied him during the day seemed more sensible as time passed and Earl watched with a distant air the young hotshots enslave themselves to the routine of their work, seemingly thinking of nothing else but onward and upward. He had learned a secret that they would never discover. Not that he wasn't an excellent accountant, but he acquired the knack of resisting the suggestion that he should aspire to rise above the comfortable level on which he was. And Martha, too, was happy to be on a plateau. With her he could discuss in veiled terms the bargain they had struck with themselves. Of course, he never explained to Helen why major promotions never came his way.

"Maybe you should talk to a headhunter and see what other possibilities there are."

"All jobs are pretty much the same for an accountant."

"But how can you know if you don't look?"

The trick was never to argue about it, to nod and seem to agree and go on as before.

"Earl, sometimes I think you have no ambition at all."

"That's not true, Helen."

"Well, you could have fooled me."

"I would never try to fool you."

The one ambition he and Helen shared, to have a family, was denied them, but Helen did not become resigned. She became more than ever determined that Earl should rise in the company.

"I'm an accountant, Helen. I don't want to be promoted out of that."

"But young Jackson is now head of the department."

And so he was. Phil Jackson was a whirlwind, a great success, but success brought ulcers, not a sense of achievement. And he developed an interest in Martha. Earl observed the progress, or lack of it, of this office romance. Martha told Jackson that she had no desire to quit working and settle down.

"Oh, you should go on working. Marriage needn't interfere with your job."

"It won't," Martha said, and eventually Jackson got her meaning. Earl found that he was relieved when Jackson grudgingly

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gave up his pursuit of Martha. Jackson needed someone who shared his attitude toward his job.

Eventually Pence retired, doing so at the earliest possible age, so he could devote himself to cultivated leisure. "Our main task is to become a real human being," he said in what Earl came to think of as Pence's farewell address. "A job is only a means to that end."

Such heresy was not for the ears of such as Jackson, nor for Helen's, either. Their domestic conversations turned constantly on Earl's status in the firm. He found that he could win this argument only when he told Martha of it later.

"Has she ever thought of getting a job?"

Was that the solution? The problem was that Earl's developing understanding of himself excluded a working wife. He liked the thought of his wife at home, queen of all she surveyed, busy at her gardening, supported by him. But it was the degree of the support that became Helen's constant theme.

"There is nothing we need that we don't have."

"All you want is your books."

For he had come to imitate Pence in this as well. His mentor had had only a modest collection of books. "The public library, Earl, supplies me all I need."

That made sense to Earl. Each week he brought home an armload of books and each week when Helen saw them she groaned. Earl weathered the storm, mastering the impulse to instruct Helen on the meaning of life. Over the years, his wife became a bitter and discontented woman.

"If she were really discontent, she would leave you," Martha said.

"She would never do that."

"You're very sure of yourself."

"No, I am very sure of her. For all her complaints, she knows we have a comfortable life."

"Does she read?"

"She prefers television."

Silence. He appreciated the fact that Martha never criticized Helen. The two women met from time to time, at the annual office picnic, but Helen had no idea how important Martha was to his peace of mind at work. And at home, too. Listening patiently to Helen complain, Earl would imagine telling Martha of it. Martha would listen, nod, understand, but never say anything against Helen.

Earl was given Pence's office after the older man's retirement, and it was there, every workday at noon, that he and Martha had their lunches and talked. Martha had become enthralled with the novels of Willa Cather and it was a pleasure to listen to her speak of them. Her favorite was *Lucy Gayheart*. Earl's current enthusiasm was Trollope, but he would rather listen to Martha than speak.

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Martha had struck him at first as plain, but with the passage of time he had come to think that hers was a rare beauty, as much of the mind as of the face, and she was aglow as she spoke of Cather's heroine. She was still speaking enthusiastically when the time came for her to return to her desk. Earl rose and accompanied her to the door. They reached for the knob simultaneously and his hand closed over hers. He did not withdraw it immediately. Martha avoided his eyes. When she was gone and the door again closed, he sat at his desk and stared at his hand. He could still feel the warmth of Martha's.

The following day, he left the door open as they had their lunch. Martha was silent, wanting him to speak. And he did, of Lady Glencora. Martha's face as she listened was a kaleidoscope of emotions. Earl fell silent. From the outer office came the murmur of voices. He found himself resenting the presence of others. The noon hour was his own, and Martha's. He got up and closed the door. When he turned, she looked at him, her face still soft with the emotion with which she had been listening to him. He crossed the room and stood before her. She dropped her eyes. After a moment, he bent and kissed the top of her head. Immediately she looked up and then his lips were on hers and he took her in his arms and held her close. Neither of them said anything. It was as if the years of their acquaintance had been moving toward this moment. He continued to hold her in his arms but after some minutes she moved away from him. Their silence was more eloquent than anything they had ever spoken. When he was alone, Earl realized that things would never be the same again.

There are men who can love two women, but Earl felt that he had never loved anyone but Martha. From that time on, evenings with Helen were an exquisite torture, the penalty he paid for being with Martha during the day. He began to leave earlier for the office and this was applauded by Helen, who took it for the belated birth of ambition. Martha noticed that he was coming in earlier and this became her practice as well. Now they had nearly an hour before the others arrived as well as lunch together. As soon as Earl closed the door of his office on them Martha came wordlessly into his arms. For weeks he dwelt in a dream world until, in the nature of things, he found his furtive trysts with Martha insufficient. He imagined them planning to steal a weekend together, but he could never bring himself to make such a proposal to Martha. Their love participated in the literary loves of which they spoke with such enthusiasm. There was only one solution. He must free himself of Helen.

But how? He had been so acquiescent in her discontent that he could hardly tell her that he no longer loved her and wanted his freedom. For all her complaining, Helen had never shown any

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inclination to leave him. He began to imagine other ways in which he could be free of her. In the greenhouse off the garage, where Helen puttered with her plants, his eye fell on a little container of arsenic. He read up on the poison and imagined ways in which he could administer it to his wife. But his blood ran cold at the thought. The time came when he even thought of taking it himself, thereby finding a solution to his dilemma. And suddenly the plan formed in his mind.

There was no question of involving Martha in his plan. He knew her well enough to predict the horror with which she would react to such an idea. But he would need her unwitting help in order to bring it off. And everything worked as he had planned.

One noon hour, he suddenly stopped talking and rose to his feet.

"What's the matter?" Martha asked.

"I feel ill." He began to breathe with difficulty and then fell back in his chair. She rushed to his side and he managed to whisper, "Call nine-one-one."

It was when the ambulance was pulling into Emergency that he bit into the half-sandwich he had in his pocket. He knew panic when he saw how crowded it was in Emergency. He needed immediate treatment or he would die. Slumping to the floor got him the attention he needed and soon his stomach was pumped and he was safe.

Rankin said, "Are you married?"

"Yes. My wife should be notified!"

"Does she make your lunch?"

"Oh, come on. We're happily married."

Rankin loosened his tie. "It's hot in here." He might have been explaining the ripe odor that emanated from him. "Do you have arsenic around the house?"

"Of course not."

"What's your home number?"

He gave it to Rankin and the detective left. He was gone fifteen minutes and when he came back he smelled anew of cigarettes.

"She's on her way."

Earl said nothing. He wished that he felt more confidence in Rankin. Everything depended on the efficiency of the police, and now that seemed a slender reed to lean upon. All they had to do was put two and two together. But would they? For a fleeting moment Earl almost wished they wouldn't. His plan had seemed abstract before, but now Helen would play the role he had cast her for. His claim that he had a happy marriage would not hold up under scrutiny. Perhaps Martha would say something when she realized that Helen was under suspicion.

"You work at Bennington and Pryor?"

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"For fifteen years." He looked at Rankin. "How did you know that?"

"I asked your wife."

Surely they would go there and find the other half of the peanut butter and jelly sandwich sprinkled with arsenic. Earl tried to relax in the confidence that everything would transpire as he planned. The thought of Martha brought back his resolve. Whatever happened, even if Helen was not formally accused, it would be an excuse to ask out of his marriage. The cloud of suspicion would suffice.

Rankin was still there when Helen came. The curtain was pulled aside and she just stood there staring at him.

"I'm all right," Earl said, and then he noticed the roses in Helen's hand.

She rushed in and stood beside him and burst into tears. Rankin took the flowers.

"You grow these yourself?" Rankin asked when Helen subsided.

"Helen has a green thumb," Earl said. He was upset by Helen's tears. She had the look of a distraught and loving wife whose husband had been restored to her.

Rankin was called to the phone and while he was gone Earl was moved to a room, Helen following along beside the stretcher like the widow of Naim.

"What on earth happened?"

Earl shrugged. "I felt sick and they brought me here."

"They said they pumped your stomach."

"It's not an experience I would recommend."

And then they arrived at the room and he was transferred to the bed. Helen had called Wilson, their doctor, and he had ordered the hospital stay. Helen had retrieved the roses from Rankin and now she fussed with them, asking a nurse to bring her a vase. Then she took up her vigil beside the bed. "I wish Dr. Wilson would get here."

"Helen, I'm all right."

"It couldn't have been food poisoning. I made your lunch. There was nothing that could possibly . . ."

"Of course not."

Wilson eventually came, checked the chart, hummed while he pressed his stethoscope to various parts of Earl's anatomy. They had put him in a hospital gown and he felt exposed with the covers thrown back.

"I want you to stay here at least tonight."

"I'll stay, too," Helen said.

"Helen, there's no need to do that. All I want to do is sleep."

"You poor darling. Of course you do."

Earl closed his eyes but knew that sleep would not come. Helen whispered with Wilson for some minutes and then the doctor left.

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Helen pulled a chair beside the bed and sat. When Rankin came back, Earl pretended to be asleep. The detective talked with Helen about her gardening.

"Do you ever use arsenic?"

"Why do you ask?"

"That's what they pumped out of your husband."

"Oh my God. I didn't think he was that despondent."

"Was he despondent?"

"He wasn't happy at work. He was always passed over for promotion."

"He took that hard?"

"Of course. It was all we talked of. But I can't believe . . ."

Earl managed not to smile. Everything was going to be all right. And then sleep came.

Helen was not there when he awoke. She had gone off with Rankin. The detective would want to see the greenhouse. He would find the arsenic. He would trace Helen's purchase of it. She would tell him that she had fixed his lunch as always.

Some hours later, she came in with Rankin, her face ashen. She tried to tell Earl what was happening. They thought she had poisoned his lunch!

Earl impressed himself with the indignation he showed, rising up in bed and threatening Rankin if he pursued that line of inquiry.

"Someone fed you arsenic, Mr. Green."

Helen began to wail, and then Rankin took her away. Ten minutes later Martha came into the room.

"They've arrested Helen," Earl said.

"How I hate her."

"Don't. She would never . . ."

"Oh, don't be a fool." And she bent over him and kissed him. Their new life together was about to begin.

"I'll get her the best lawyer."

"It won't matter."

"I can't go home to an empty house."

"You couldn't go back to a house with her in it."

He took her hand, remembering the first time his hand had closed over hers. There was really no need to say anything.

Helen was arraigned and held on suspicion of attempted murder. Martha had no compunction about telling the police about Earl's marriage and how unhappy he was with his harping wife.

"She is very loyal to you," Rankin observed.

"We've worked together for years."

Rankin nodded. He seemed to have taken a shower, but he still smelled of cigarettes. "The two of you always had lunch together?"

"She brought her lunch too."

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"You ate in your office?"

"Yes."

"There was arsenic in your sandwich."

"My God."

"What has Phil Jackson got against you?"

"Jackson? Nothing." But he remembered the younger man's interest in Martha. Had he told Rankin of that? How would his relations with Martha have been described by those in the office? It seemed to Earl that they had not bothered about being discreet. If Rankin had talked with Phil Jackson, he would have been given reason to wonder about Earl's inseparability from Martha.

"Your wife denies everything," Rankin said.

"I still don't believe she would do such a thing."

"Neither do I."

"What do you mean?"

"You should have worn gloves."

Earl just stared at the imperfectly shaven detective.

Rankin went on. "I got a set of your prints from a glass you used here. They match those on the arsenic container. Yours are the only prints on it."

"That's absurd."

"Maybe. But it's a fact. So we're back to the other alternative. You poisoned yourself."

"I would never do that."

"There is another possibility."

"What?"

"Martha."

"No!"

"So what's it going to be? Who did it?"

But of course no case could be made against Martha.

"I'm releasing your wife."

"And then?"

"Suicide is against the law. But it would be a waste of time prosecuting you." Rankin shook his head. "You are a bastard, Green. How could you do such a thing to your wife?"

Wilson ordered his release, but Martha came before he left the hospital room. She refused to let him take her hand and stared coldly at him.

"What a terrible thing to do."

"Has Rankin convinced you?"

"He didn't have to. You're a monster."

Earl left the hospital alone. He had lost both Martha and Helen. It was a clear, sunlit day but there were traces of cloud in the sky, white wisps of prelapsarian innocence. "I'm free," Earl told himself. "Free." And it was all he could do not to cry. ●

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Art by Mark Evan Walker

SECONDARY SMOKE

by Jeffrey T. Williamson

Dodge Farris was doing what his son Charles didn't want him to do in an effort to obtain what his son Charles didn't want him to have. He was driving at night over snow-covered roads to get a pack of cigarettes.

Charles was always telling him what to do and what not to do, as if Dodge were a child and not a seventy-three-year-old man. Charles claimed he was acting out of concern for Dodge's welfare, but Dodge knew better: Charles had been a controlling little priss as a kid and had only settled deeper into that role as a middle-aged man. Which was not to say he had been a bad son. Not at all. Charles was a successful accountant, a devoted family man who had married the first girl he had been serious about in school, and he had given Dodge three granddaughters, all college grads now and out on their own. He had never done a single thing that Dodge could find fault with. That was the problem, actually, and the reason Dodge had never felt the kinship with Charles he imagined other fathers felt for their sons. Dodge's wildness, the willingness to take chances that had gotten him into the army when he was

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sixteen, into a series of random and dubious business ventures after the war, into three marriages and three divorces, and finally, with the help of the crazy bull market of the nineties, into the burgeoning ranks of paper millionaires—that seed had somehow not been passed along to Charles.

Or so it had seemed until the advent of the Faded Swedish Bombshell.

The Faded Swedish Bombshell—FSB for short—that was Dodge's name for her, although never to be uttered in his son's presence, lest Dodge be forced into the dreary exercise of watching Charles's back stiffen and his already rather small mouth grow even smaller. The FSB's real name was Agneta Ulriksson. Charles had met her a year ago on a business trip to Boston. The encounter, unannounced at the time, had yielded a seismic repercussion: Charles had left Marilyn, his wife of twenty-nine years, and moved into a condominium apartment complex overlooking the Hudson. As soon as tax season was over and he had some spare time, he planned to sue for divorce.

A former advertising writer who had a short story published in *Redbook* many years prior to making his first sale to *EQMM* this year, Jeffrey T. Williamson has now turned to novel writing. His recently completed novel has the same title as his debut story for us: *Trenton Makes, the World Takes.* We wish him luck in finding a publisher; meanwhile readers will no doubt enjoy his new light, satirical tale "Secondary Smoke." ¶

Charles had revealed all this to Dodge in the course of a long and fervent conversation at the Oyster Bar in Grand Central. Not used to drinking, but apparently feeling that the moment called for it, his son downed three scotches in quick succession and launched into a tale of a middle-aged passion that was remarkable chiefly for its utter absence of originality. He loved Agneta. He worshiped her. He lusted after her. He had never felt such emotions, such sensations before. He could not live without Agneta. In fact, as he realized now for the first time in all his fifty-four years, he had never really lived before he had met her. He had never once, in any decision of consequence, followed his heart. But he must do so now, whatever the repercussions.

"You know what I'm talking about, Dad," said Charles, grabbing Dodge's wrist, breathing sweet scotch into his face. "You of all people understand. You've made mistakes. But you've always done it your way."

Dodge smiled uncomfortably. One more drink and Charles was liable to burst into a bad rendition of the song Sinatra had made

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famous. Dodge pointed to his watch and reminded his son that if they left the bar now they could make the 7:05 express.

"Take a look at her picture," Charles urged. "I have her picture right here in my pocket. I don't go anywhere without it. I look at it fifteen, twenty times a day. Can you believe that? Fifteen, twenty times a day. Here. You look. I want you to look."

His son handed him a photograph of a statuesque blonde in a black sheath dress, black fishnet stockings, and very red, very high heels, standing in what appeared to be a hotel function room. Dodge was surprised to realize that she was close to his son's age, possibly even older. She was a handsome woman, no doubt about it, but well past the point where she should be wearing her hair long enough to fall six inches below her shoulders.

"What do you think?" Charles sounded as excited as a teenager.

Dodge scrubbed his chin, realizing, irrelevantly, that he had done a poor job shaving that morning. "Good-looking woman," he said loudly, trying to make up in volume what he lacked in enthusiasm. In truth, Dodge was disappointed and more than a little concerned. Charles could have done better than her. What's more, there was something about her, something that Dodge had enough experience with women to discern even from a casual photograph, that spelled trouble.

It was not actually snowing when Dodge decided to violate his son's orders and go for cigarettes, although there was close to a foot on the ground from yesterday's storm. But no sooner did he get out the door than it started up again—fine flakes that glittered in the light of the foolish faux lanterns that illuminated the condo grounds. Dodge scraped away enough ice on the windshield and back window to be able to see, backed cautiously out of his space, then headed to the condo exit. When the white gate rose up and Dodge accelerated past it he gave a little yip of joy. Freedom, he thought, blessed freedom!

He negotiated the mile from the condo to the 7-Eleven on Route 9 without incident. He purchased his cigarettes, unfiltered Camels, from the checkout girl with only a mild sense of guilt. And as soon as he had got back into the car he unwrapped the pack, took out a cigarette, lit it, and inhaled deeply. It was delicious.

Dodge enjoyed himself immensely on the way back. Being out on a night when hardly anyone else dared to be out, with the heater on and a brisk edge of air slipping through the just-cracked driver's window and the tip of the cigarette glowing in the dark and the fragrant tobacco burning—Dodge felt young and bold and free and in a mood to tell Charles, should he happen to run into him on this particular stretch of snowy road, to go straight to hell. And to take the FSB with him.

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But since his son was still in his office, working on tax returns late into the night, Dodge decided to do the next thing that popped into his mind, which was to drive right past the entrance to the condo. He would drive until the cigarette was finished. *Then* he would turn around and go back.

If he felt like it.

He had gone maybe a mile further north on Route 9 when he saw the turnoff for Spring Lake Pike. His own house was in that direction, a couple of miles and a few turns down the road. The area was sparsely populated, mostly woods and hills, and the roads were never as well plowed—which was why, when yesterday's storm had been forecast, Charles had insisted that he come stay with him at the condo. It was beautiful out there when it snowed, and Dodge regretted missing the sight of the white-mantled firs and the snow-covered expanse of the lake and the tracks of the deer and birds and rabbits, and the occasional red fox that prowled around his house. None of this would be visible at night, of course, but Dodge still felt the urge to head that way, get away from the suburban order and propriety, get into the woods. It still wasn't snowing particularly hard, and the roads didn't seem so bad. He slowed and took the turnoff.

He drove past the nature preserve, past the turnoff for the reservoir, and over the old concrete bridge that spanned the Creighton River. He was approaching Spring Lake, coming around the bend that preceded his house, when he saw the light. On the right, maybe a hundred yards up the steep shoulder of the road.

His first thought was that his neighbor, Dominic Corrado, had come back early from Florida. That would be a piece of luck. He could stop and have a glass of that vile Guinea brandy, that grappa that Dominic's relatives were always shipping over from the old country, and listen to Dominic tell lies about all the topless women he'd chatted up on South Beach—as if any one of those delicious creatures would even give the time of day to a withered old contractor in shorts and black socks!

He was slowing the car, chuckling at the prospective encounter with an old friend, when he realized the light wasn't coming from Dominic's house. It was coming from another hundred yards down the road. It was coming from his own house.

He was so surprised that he braked the car too suddenly. The rear wheels broke loose and the car began to slide sideways down the snow-covered road.

No problem, Dodge thought. Clamping the cigarette between his teeth, he smiled broadly. He knew how to handle a skid. Turn into it. And let off the brakes, which is exactly what he did.

It worked. He got the car back under control and guided it gently to a stop on the shoulder of the road, just past the foot of the

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long, rising driveway that led up to his house. The driveway had been plowed since he left—Manny who owned the Sunoco station down the road always took good care of him—but he was not about to risk heading up it with the snow still coming down. Besides, it looked as if there were already a couple of cars parked at the top of the drive. He could see them clearly because the light over the garage was on. One was a little red job, some kind of ragtop, a sports car. The other was a blue Taurus. Charles's blue Taurus.

Dodge frowned. What was Charles's Taurus doing here if Charles was in the city working late? A second later, he realized what must be going on, and he broke into a delighted grin.

That sly fox! Charles had told him he was working late so he could use Dodge's house for an evening assignation! The red sports car must belong to the FSB. At this moment, Charles might very well be demonstrating to the FSB that his mastery of ins and outs was not restricted to the tax code!

Dodge threw back his head and laughed out loud.

"Charles, Charles, Charles," Dodge muttered. "You had me fooled. You definitely had the old man fooled!"

Smiling and shaking his head, Dodge looked back up at the house. There were no lights on in either the living room or the dining room, which were in the front, but there was a bright yellowish glow on the snow at the back left corner. The master bedroom was in the back left corner. Yes, indeed, they were in there, and judging from the intensity of the light on the snow, the curtains on the window were not drawn.

Dodge's next thought was so improper, so delectably truant, that it caused his hands to start shaking. To still them, he lit another cigarette and took a deep, deep drag.

Fortunately, he had worn his old galoshes, for the snow around the house was more than a foot deep. It was rough going, and by the time he reached the back corner of the house, he was out of breath. He waited, close to the side of the house, near the window, but outside the lozenge of light that spilled out onto the snow, and unable to see in. A wisp of vaporous air rose out of the lower corner of the window. One of the panes of the eight-over-eight had had a triangle broken out of the corner for close to a year and Dodge had never gotten around to having it fixed.

Dodge leaned against the side of the house, waiting for his breathing to return to normal. His heart, however, refused to slow down; he was far too excited at the prospect of what he might see. He clamped a hand over his mouth to suppress an involuntary giggle. After a minute, he took a deep breath, leaned forward, and peered in.

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The night-lights were on at either side of the wrought-iron bed, the covers were turned down, and on the night table there was a wine bottle and two stemmed glasses, but the room was empty. The door to the bathroom, set in the wall on the far side of the bed, was a few inches ajar. Light and steam were coming out. Someone was taking a shower.

In preparation, not conclusion, Dodge fervently hoped.

Minutes passed. Dodge's feet grew cold. His nose dripped. He began to worry that perhaps either his son or the FSB was leaving and might notice his car parked on the road below. He began to feel silly and juvenile—conscious that he was behaving in a way exactly befitting the manner in which his son had been treating him. What was he doing, peeping into his own bedroom window? Why had he come here? Why had he even gone out to get cigarettes? What a pathetic old fool he was!

Then the FSB came in through the bedroom door, and the transparent red and black negligee floating out behind her swept all of Dodge's recriminations away.

She went directly to the night table and poured wine into each of the glasses, moving with a certainty and economy of motion that Dodge had no doubt arose from long experience. She took a last drag on the cigarette in her hand and stubbed it out in the ashtray Dodge kept on his night table. She turned, about to walk away, then looked back, frowning. Apparently dissatisfied with the romantic effect of the unclean ashtray next to the wineglasses, she picked it up and brought it over to the window sill. Dodge reflexively drew back farther into the shadows, but there was no need. The FSB was intent on her preparations.

Having set the ashtray aside, she went directly to the mirror over the dresser on the right side of the bed. From a large leather bag she extracted a tube of lipstick and drew it over her bottom lip. She then pressed both lips together and examined the results in the mirror. She smiled and picked a fleck of red off one of her teeth. Then she stepped back and regarded her entire image with a cold, assessing look. Reaching up first to her right shoulder, then her left, she did something to the straps of the negligee. The neckline dropped a good two inches.

Dodge's Adam's apple followed suit.

Over the next few minutes, the FSB continued setting the stage for the upcoming encounter, dousing all but one night-table light, tuning the clock radio to a smooth jazz station, turning back the covers, piling up pillows and arranging herself *just so* on top of them. Dodge found himself reevaluating her, and his son as well. True, she was no innocent. On the other hand, there was a certain advantage to experience, especially when it came in a form as—Dodge cleared his throat appreciatively—*well-developed* as hers.

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Heck, if Charles was up to what the FSB had to offer, more power to him.

Dodge was thinking about having another cigarette, in celebration of Charles's belated liberation, when the door to the bathroom opened and out stepped a muscular young man with a bath towel wrapped around his waist. For an instant, Dodge thought his son had dropped forty pounds and done a lot of working out—although how he had found the time during tax season was unclear. Then he realized the obvious: The muscular young man was not Charles.

Dodge's shock turned to bewilderment, then to outrage. Not only was the FSB cheating on his son, she was using his—Dodge's—house to do it!

Dodge was so furious that he was on the verge of pounding on the window and . . . and, well he wasn't sure quite what he would do then. Or what they would do when they saw him. It might not turn out well. In fact, it might turn out very badly.

As he wrestled with the problem, the muscular young man kneeled down at the foot of the bed and reached into a zippered gym bag. Out came a silvery circular object, then another.

Handcuffs.

Now Dodge was not a naive man, nor without experience with women. But he was of a generation where the appearance of mechanical apparatus in bedroom encounters was not quite so routine as it is today. So his first thought, irrational as it may seem, was that the muscular young man was a law enforcement officer who was about to arrest the FSB—for illegal use of another man's bedroom, which, if it wasn't a crime, should be! It wasn't until the FSB took the cuffs from the young man, motioned for him to lie down on the bed, and began attaching his wrists to the wrought-iron headboard that Dodge understood what was actually going on.

And it wasn't until the FSB, with a bit of erotic ceremony that was as overdone as her makeup, laid the keys to the cuffs far out of the young man's reach, on the sill to the bedroom window only inches from the broken windowpane, that Dodge understood he had been given an opportunity. A golden opportunity.

All at once Dodge was filled with the patience of a hunter who knows that his prey is almost within his grasp. Calmly, he waited for the activity in bed to reach a certain level of mutual absorption. When he was sure he would not be noticed, he leaned closer to the window and worked his hand into the triangular opening left by the broken windowpane. He moved very carefully so as not to cut himself on the sharp edge of the broken glass, and so as not to disturb the ashtray with the FSB's crushed-out cigarette. In the end, it was necessary to pull back the sleeve of his coat for his arm

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to fit in far enough to reach the keys and flick them out of sight behind the loveseat to the left of the window. He had to keep his sleeve pulled back again when he reached in a second time to touch a lighted match to the edge of the drapes.

Back in his car, Dodge Farris was working on his third cigarette of the night. Through the open driver's-side window he could hear the approaching sirens of the fire engines, which he had summoned with the cell phone his son had given him. The fire engines were probably not strictly necessary; Dodge was sure a woman as resourceful as the FSB would be able to overcome her panic and find a way to extinguish his little drapery blaze. But the firefighters' nicely timed arrival would ensure that her little tryst would end in a gratifyingly public way.

Of course, Charles would never understand how big a favor Dodge had done him in ignoring his injunctions against driving in the snow and smoking cigarettes. With the object of his midlife crisis exposed for the opportunist she was, Charles would no doubt go back to his wife. Within a year, he would be more annoyingly conventional than ever.

Dodge sighed. He could just hear his son, the freshly righteous ex-adulterer, redoubling his efforts to reform him. Lecturing him about not eating fatty foods, getting enough exercise, not drinking too much alcohol, not smoking.

Of all Charles's rants, smoking was by far his favorite. He'd tried every angle to persuade Dodge to quit, but Dodge always had an answer for him.

"Smoking will give you cancer, emphysema," Charles would say.

"I've been smoking sixty years and I don't have either."

"It'll stain your fingers and teeth."

"I don't care about my fingers and I can always buy new teeth."

"It'll stink up your clothes and your house."

"As long as I smoke, I can't smell it."

"Well, if you don't care what your damned smoking does to you, you should at least consider what it does to everyone else!"

Dodge inhaled deeply and watched the firefighters jump off the truck and rush up to his house, where the FSB and her handcuffed young man waited.

He smiled and allowed the smoke to drift out of his nose. Charles was right; in the past he hadn't thought much about the effects of his smoking on others. But from this moment on, he certainly would. ●

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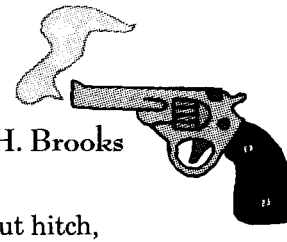

Blank Check

by Terry Lerdall Fitterer & Katherine H. Brooks

Emily stared at the smoking revolver,
smirked at the deaths that went off without hitch,
jumped in the car and quick rolled down the window—
threw out the evidence deep in the ditch.

Proud as a peacock she sped down the highway
leaving all thoughts of regret at the scene,
glad that the dastardly deed was accomplished,
laughed till she thought she would rupture her spleen.

Knowing full well that her husband had cheated,
she'd started the plotting and scheming posthaste,
planned a revenge she found quite entertaining,
courting this murder with no time to waste.

Followed the twosome one night to their love nest,
snuck in the door with maniacal frown,
caught them embraced, spoofing looks of confusion—
more than the lovers' defenses were down!

Picked up a log near the fire in a panic—
wasn't expecting they'd still be awake,
battered their heads (better yet, we'll say bludgeoned),
they sputtered and gasped—still alive, for God's sake!

Then, grabbing her gun to dispatch them with vigor,
since logs wouldn't do for so evil a pair,
she planted her finger on top of the trigger,
and blasted away while they gurgled for air.

She wasn't too bright, but her aim was perfection,
she'd practiced a lot, and for that she gave thanks,
she never looked back to examine her victims,
not knowing her pistol was loaded with blanks.

The lovers awoke and sought medic's attention,
all covered with splinters and large bloody drops,
and doctors, removing the bark from their noggins,
suggested they make a report to the cops.

They did, and poor Emily, sadder but wiser,
now sits in a cell and continues to plot,
her husband still cheats with a happy abandon,
not caring if Emily knows it or not.

She vows when she's out she'll recover her pistol,
it's still in the ditch where she tossed it that night,
then back to the love nest she'll go with a vengeance,
and plenty of bullets to do it up right!

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THE WAGON MOUND

by Val McDermid

Nothing destroys the quality of life so much as insomnia. Ask any parent of a new baby. It only takes a few broken nights to reduce the most calm and competent person to a twitching shadow of their normal proficiency. My wakefulness started when the nightmares began. When I did manage to drop off, the visions my subconscious mind conjured up were guaranteed to wake me, sweating and terrified, within a couple of hours of nodding off. It didn't take long before I began to fear sleep itself, dreading the demons that ripped through the fabric of my previous ease. I tried sleeping pills, I tried alcohol. But nothing worked.

"There is no one in contemporary crime fiction who has managed to combine the visceral and the humane as well as Val McDermid . . . She's the best," says the *New York Times*. The *Guardian* agrees, describing her as: "Our leading pathologist of everyday evil—the subtle orchestration of terror is masterful." This autumn a new TV series based on Val McDermid's books will air on Britain's ITV.

I never dreamed that I'd rediscover the art of sleeping through the night thanks to a legal precedent. In 1961, the Privy Council heard a case concerning a negligent oil spillage from a ship called the *Wagon Mound* in Sydney Harbour. The oil fouled a nearby wharf, and in spite of expert advice that it wouldn't catch fire, when the wharf's owners began welding work, the oil did exactly what it wasn't supposed to do. The fire that followed caused enough damage for it to be worth taking to court, where the Privy Council finally decreed that the ship's owners weren't liable because the *type* of harm sustained by the plaintiff was not, as the law required, reasonably foreseeable. When Roger, the terminally boring commercial attaché at the Moscow embassy, launched into the tale the other night in the bar at Proyekt OGI, he could never have imagined that it would change my life so dramatically. But then, lawyers have never been noted for their imagination.

Proximity. That's another legal principle that came up during Roger's lecture. How many intervening stages lie between cause

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and effect. I think, by then, I was the only one listening, because his disquisition had made me think back to the starting point of my sleepless nights.

Although the seeds were sown when my boss in London decided to invite the bestselling biographer Tom Uttley on a British Council tour of Russia, I can't be held accountable for that. The first point where I calculate I have to accept responsibility was on the night train from Moscow to St. Petersburg.

I'd been looking after Tom ever since he'd landed at Sheremetyevo Airport two days before. I hadn't seen him smile in all that time. He'd lectured lugubriously at the university, glumly addressed a gathering at the British Council library, done depressing signings at two bookshops, and sulked his way round a reception at the Irish embassy. Even the weather seemed to reflect his mood, grey clouds lowering over Moscow and turning April into autumn. Minding visiting authors is normally the part of my job I like best, but spending time with Tom was about as much fun as having a hole in your shoe in a Russian winter. We'd all been hoping for some glamour from Tom's visit; his Channel Four series on the roots of biography had led us to expect a glowing Adonis with twinkling eyes and a gleaming grin. Instead, we got a glowering black dog.

Over dinner on the first evening, he'd downed his vodka like a seasoned Russia hand, and gloomed like the most depressive Slav in the Caucasus. On the short walk back to his hotel, I asked him if everything was all right. "No," he said shortly. "My wife's just left me."

Right, I thought. *Don't go there, Sarah.* "Oh," I think I said.

The final event of his Moscow visit was a book signing, and afterwards, I took him to dinner to pass the time till midnight, when the train would leave for St. Pete's. That was when the floodgates opened. He was miserable, he admitted. He was terrible company. But Rachel had walked out on him after eight years of marriage. There wasn't anyone else, she'd said. It was just that she was bored with him, tired of his celebrity, fed up of feeling inferior intellectually. I pointed out that these reasons seemed somewhat contradictory.

He brightened up at that. And suddenly the sun came out. He acted as if I'd put my finger on something that should make him feel better about the whole thing. He radiated light, and I basked in the warmth of his smile. Before long, we were laughing together, telling our life stories, swapping intimacies. Flirting, I suppose.

We boarded the train a little before midnight, each dumping our bags in our separate first-class compartments. Then Tom produced a bottle of Georgian champagne from his holdall. "A nightcap?" he suggested.

"Why not?" I was in the mood, cheered beyond reason by the delights of his company. He sat down on the sleeping berth beside me, and it seemed only natural when his arm draped across my

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shoulders. I remember the smell of him; a dark, masculine smell with an overlay of some spicy cologne with an edge of cinnamon. If I'm honest, I was willing him to kiss me before he actually did. I was entirely disarmed by his charm. But I also felt sorry for the pain that had been so obvious over the previous two days. And maybe, just maybe, the inherent Dr. Zhivago romance of the night train tipped the balance.

I don't usually do this kind of thing. What am I saying? I *never* do this kind of thing. In four years of chasing around after authors, or having them chase after me, I'd not given in to temptation once. But Tom penetrated all of my professional defenses, and I moaned under his hands from Moscow to St. Petersburg. By morning, he swore I'd healed his heart. By the time he left St. Pete's three days later, we'd arranged to meet in London, where I was due to attend a meeting in ten days' time. I'd been out of love for a long time; it wasn't hard to fall for a man who was handsome, clever, and amusing, and who seemed to find me irresistible.

Two days later, I got his first e-mail. I'd been checking every waking hour on the hour, wondering and edgy. It turned out I had good reason to be anxious. The e-mail was short and sour: "Dear Sarah, Rachel and I have decided we want to try to resolve our difficulties. It'll come as no surprise to you that my marriage is my number-one priority. So I think it best if we don't communicate further. Sorry if this seems cold, but there's no other way to say it. Tom."

I was stunned. This wasn't cold, it was brutal. A hard jab below the ribs, designed to take my breath away and deflect any possible comeback. I felt the physical shock in the pit of my stomach.

Of course, I blamed myself for my stupidity, my eagerness to believe that a man as charismatic as Tom could fall for me. Good old reliable Sarah, the safe pair of hands who second-guessed authors' needs before they could even voice them. I felt such a fool. A bruised, exploited fool.

Time passed, but there was still a raw place deep inside me. Tom Uttley had taken more from me than a few nights of sexual pleasure; he'd taken away my trust in my judgement. I told nobody about my humiliation. It would have been one pain too many.

Then Lindsay McConnell arrived. An award-winning dramatist, she'd come to give a series of workshops on radio adaptation. She was impeccably professional, no trouble to take care of. And we hit it off straightaway. On her last night, I took her to my favourite Moscow eating place, a traditional Georgian restaurant tucked away in a courtyard in the Armenian quarter. As the wine slipped down, we gossiped and giggled. Then, in the course of some anecdote, she mentioned Tom Uttley. Just hearing his name made my guts clench. "You know Tom?" I asked, struggling not to sound too interested.

"Oh God, yes. I was at university with Rachel, his wife. Of

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course, you had Tom out here last year, didn't you? He said he'd had a really interesting time."

I bet he did, I thought bitterly. "How are they now? Tom and Rachel?" I asked with the true masochist's desire for the twist of the knife.

Lindsay looked puzzled. "What do you mean, how are they now?"

"When Tom was here, Rachel had just left him."

She frowned. "Are you sure you're not confusing him with someone else? They're solid as a rock, Tom and Rachel. God knows, if he was mine I'd have murdered him years ago, but Rachel thinks the sun shines out of his arse."

It was my turn to frown. "He told me she'd just walked out on him. He was really depressed about it."

Lindsay shook her head. "God, how very Tom. He hates touring, you know. He'll do anything to squeeze out a bit of sympathy, make sure he gets premier-league treatment. He just likes to have everyone running around after him, Sarah. I'm telling you, Rachel has never left him. Now I think about it, that week he was in Russia, I went round there for dinner. Me and Rachel and a couple of her colleagues. You know, from *Material Girl.* The magazine she works for. I think if they'd split up, she might have mentioned it, don't you?"

I hoped I wasn't looking as stunned as I felt. I'd never thought of myself as stupid, but that calculating bastard had spun me a line and reeled me in open-mouthed like the dumbest fish in the pond. But of course, because I'm a woman and that's how we're trained to think, I was still blaming myself more than him. I'd clearly been sending out the signals of needy gullibility and he'd just come up with the right line to exploit them.

I was still smarting from what I saw as my self-inflicted wound a few weeks later at the Edinburgh Book Festival, where we British Council types gather like bees to pollen. But at least I'd finally have the chance to share my idiocy with Camilla, my opposite number in Jerusalem. We'd worked together years before in Paris, and we'd become bosom buddies. The only reason I hadn't told her about Tom previously was that every time I wrote it down in an e-mail, it just looked moronic. It needed a girls' night in with a couple of bottles of decent red wine before I could let this one spill out.

Late on the second night, after a particularly gruelling Amnesty International event, we sneaked back to the flat we were sharing with a couple of the boys from the Berlin office and started in on the confessional. My story crawled out of me, and I realised yet again how foolish I'd been from the horrified expression on Camilla's face. That and her appalled silence. "I don't believe it," she breathed.

"I know, I know," I groaned. "How could I have been so stupid?"

"No, no," she said angrily. "Not you, Sarah. Tom Uttley."

"What?"

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"That duplicitous bastard Uttley. He pulled exactly the same stunt on Georgie Bullen in Madrid. The identical line about his wife leaving him. She told me about it when I flew in for Semana Negra last month."

"But I thought Georgie was living with someone?"

"She was," Camilla said. "Paco, the stage manager at the opera house. She'd taken Uttley down to Granada to do some lectures there, that's when it happened. Georgie saw the scumbag off on the plane and came straight home and told Paco it was over, she'd met someone else. She threw him out, then two days later she got the killer e-mail from Tom."

We gazed at each other, mouths open. "The bastard," I said. For the first time, anger blotted out my self-pity and pain.

"Piece of shit," Camilla agreed.

We spent the rest of the bottle and most of the second one thinking of ways to exact revenge on Tom Uttley, but we both knew that there was no way I was going back to Moscow to find a hit man to take him out. The trouble was, we couldn't think of anything that would show him up without making us look like silly credulous girls. Most blokes, no matter how much they might pretend otherwise, would reckon, good on him for working out such a foolproof scam to get his leg over. Most women would reckon we'd got what we deserved for being so naive.

I was thirty thousand feet above Poland when the answer came to me. The woman in the seat next to me had been reading *Material Girl* and she offered it to me when she'd finished. I looked down the editorial list, curious to see exactly what Rachel Uttley did on the magazine. Her name was near the top of the credits. *Fiction Editor, Rachel Uttley.* A quick look at the contents helped me deduce that as well as the books page, Rachel was responsible for editing the three short stories. There, at the end of the third, was a sentence saying that submissions for publication should be sent to her.

I've always wanted to write. One of the reasons I took this job in the first place was to learn as much as I could from those who do it successfully. I had half a novel on my hard disk, but I reckoned it was time to try a short story.

Two days later, I'd written it. The central character was a biographer who specialised in seducing professional colleagues on foreign trips with a tale about his wife having left him. Then he'd dump them as soon as he'd got home. When one of his victims realises what he's been up to, she exposes the serial adulterer by sending his wife, a magazine editor, a short story revealing his exploits. And the wife, recognising her errant husband from the pen portrait, finally does walk out on him.

Before I could have second thoughts, I printed it out and stuffed it in an envelope addressed to Rachel at *Material Girl.* Then I sat

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back and waited.

For a couple of weeks, nothing happened. Then, one Tuesday morning, I was sitting in the office browsing BBC online news. His name leapt out at me. TOM UTTLEY DIES IN BURGLARY, read the headline in the latest news section. I clicked on the "more" button.

> Bestselling biographer and TV presenter Tom Uttley was found dead this morning at his home in North London. It is believed he disturbed a burglar. He died from a single stab wound to the stomach. Police say there was evidence of a break-in at the rear of the house.
>
> Uttley was discovered by his wife, Rachel, a journalist. Police are calling for witnesses who may have seen one or two men fleeing the scene in the early hours of the morning.

I had to read the bare words three or four times before they sank in. Suddenly, his lies didn't matter anymore. All I could think of was his eyes on mine, the flash of his easy smile, the touch of his hand. The sparkle of wit in his conversation. The life in him that had been snuffed out. The books he would never write.

Over a succession of numb days, I pursued the story via the Internet. Bits and pieces emerged gradually. They'd had an attempted burglary a few months before. Rachel, who was a poor sleeper, had taken sleeping pills and stuffed ear plugs in before going to bed. Tom, the police reckoned, had heard the sound of breaking glass and gone downstairs to investigate. The intruder had snatched up a knife from the kitchen worktop and plunged it into his stomach, then fled. Tom had bled to death on the kitchen floor. It had taken him awhile to die, they thought. And Rachel had come down for breakfast to find him stiff and cold on the kitchen floor. Poor bloody Rachel, I thought.

On the fifth day after the news broke, there was a large Manila envelope among my post, franked with the *Material Girl* logo. My story had come winging its way back to me. Inside, there was a handwritten note from Rachel.

Dear Sarah, Thank you so much for your submission. I found your story intriguing and thought-provoking. A real eye-opener, in fact. But I felt the ending was rather weak and so I regret we're unable to publish it. However, I like your style. I'd be very interested to see more of your work. Gratefully yours, Rachel Uttley.

That's when I realised what I'd done. Like Oscar Wilde, I'd killed the thing I'd loved.

That's when my sleepless nights started.

And that's why I'm so very, very grateful for Roger and the case they call Wagon Mound (No.1). And for an understanding of proximity. Thanks to him, I've finally realised I'm not the guilty party here. Neither is Rachel.

The guilty party is the one who started the wagon rolling. Lovely, sexy, reckless Tom Uttley. ●

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BY KATE WILHELM

Truth
BY JOHN HARVEY

To Live and Die in Midland, Texas
BY CLARK HOWARD

The Discount Club
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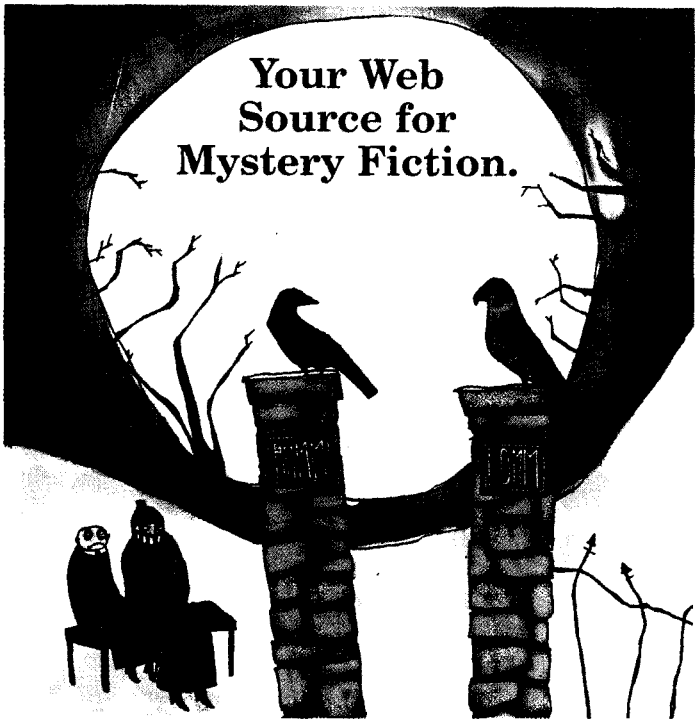

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